

Forts Bent's fort



**Who Were Colorado's
First Tourists?**

For over a century and a half Colorado's scenic wonders have startled and delighted visitors. While Zebulon Pike's expedition just after 1800 was basically a military exploration tour, the accompanying civilians experienced the same thrill of viewing the snow-capped Rockies as you and I.

Pike and his group were "feeling out" the military strength of the Mexican rule in Colorado's southern portion. Taken into custody by mounted troops from Mexico, Pike was gently, but firmly escorted back to the border. Even greater than lending his name to a spectacular mountain peak, Pike's importance was to bring home information which led to the American western expansion.

Due to the extreme value of beaver pelts (\$6.00 per lb.) used for popular beaver hats on the east coast and in Europe, more and more visitors came to Colorado: French-Canadians, Spaniards, Mexicans, French creoles from New Orleans and St. Louis, Germans, and large numbers of Americans of English, Scotch and Irish ancestry. They stayed and trapped the elusive beaver.

These rugged men became a special breed ... mountain men. Not satisfied to equal the Indian's skills, the mountain man developed every sense to the utmost. He could detect wild game, or "hostiles" by spotting the most minute evidences. A broken twig floating down a stream, changes in insect noises, bird call warnings, or an overturned pebble immediately alerted his gun to a ready position.

Famous Colorado mountain men were: Old Bill Williams (a preacher turned Indian) for whom Williams, Ariz. is named; Jim Baker, a red-haired

scout; Uncle Dick Wootton, employes of the Bents, builder of the toll road over Raton Pass into New Mexico, and proprietor of Denver's first mercantile store; Jim Beckwourth, a fantastic mulatto trapper and scout who died from a poisoned dessert prepared by his seven Crow Indian wives.

Before the Mexican War in 1846, the Arkansas River was the U. S.-Mexican border. This river originates high in the southern Colorado Rockies, and is fed by melting snow waters. It flows eastward from the mountains to the Gulf of Mexico. The world's highest suspension bridge (over 1,000 ft. above the river) spans the Arkansas at the Royal Gorge, near Canon City, Colorado. After it leaves the mountains, the Arkansas passes Pueblo, Colorado and flows eastward sixty miles to the site of Colorado's most important and historic frontier site . . . that of Bent's Old Fort.

In the 1820's two sons of Judge Bent of St. Louis came west to seek their fortunes. William and Charles Bent had the young man's urge to see the "shining mountains." Moreover, wonderous tales had been brought back to Missouri of trade opportunities with New Mexico. One hundred dollars in Yankee merchandise would bring a thousand dollars return . . . and it was true in these early days, for New Mexico comprised the boondocks of the Mexican empire, and manufactured goods from Mexico and Europe were scarce and outrageously priced.

In 1833-34 the Bents completed a huge baronial adobe castle-like fort. Situated on the north bank of the Arkansas (nine miles from present

day La Junta, Colorado ... 60 miles east of Pueblo, the fort was on the American side of the border. This was the first tourist center in Colorado.

Virtually a small city, Bent's Fort had a tailor shop, a blacksmith shop, a gunsmith, a restaurant, trade goods rooms, sleeping accommodations, an infirmary, armory, an upstairs bar with a billiard table, a smoke house, garden, and an ice house. This latter cooled the lemonade and "Hailstorm" mint juleps traditionally drunk all day every July 4th.

Touring visitors ate the famed Negro cook Charlotte's pumpkin pie and slapjacks. Buffalo meat was provided by a young hunter named Kit Carson ... later to achieve fame as a scout and Indian fighter and friend.

Fine clarets, burgundies, and French champagne were served in crystal glassware. Yet "Taos lightning" ... the wheat whiskey distilled by Americans in the small New Mexican village above Santa Fe ... was the favorite of the leather-throated mountain men, Mexicans and Indians. Kentucky whiskey was written phonetically by the Mexicans as "Quentoque Jisque." Glass bottles emptied by the first tourists could be sold to the glass-starved New Mexicans for more money than the full bottle had cost in Missouri.

The basic meat of the frontier was buffalo. Favorite portions in order of popularity were: The tongue, the hump, the medullary intestine or "boudin", ribs, steaks, and marrow bones. A favorite trick of the mountain men was to serve up the highly popular Indian dish of dog stew to greenhorns.

(See Inside)

Another important river in Colorado was the South Platte. It begins high in the mountains south of Denver, flows northeast through present-day Denver, and wends its way to northeastern Colorado where it eventually joins the North Platte. From there, across Nebraska, and eventually to St. Louis and the Mississippi. It's hard to believe that in 1837 bull boats (made from buffalo hides) sailed from a trade fort just north of Denver all the way to St. Louis in 69 days.

Just north of present-day Denver were four trade forts ... similar to Bents, but smaller. Ft. Lupton, Ft. Jackson, Ft. St. Vrain, and Ft. Vasquez were their names. Tourists such as Dr. Wislizenius from Germany, Rufus Sage, George F. Ruxton and Captain Cathcart (both from England), Matt Field, a writer from the New Orleans Picayune newspaper, visited Colorado's early forts and were amazed by the behaviour of the residents. Indian wives were bought and sold for a bottle of "lightnin'", or were won in shooting matches or gambling games. The Indian and Mexican women in the forts nonetheless joined in with uproaring parties or "fandangoes." Guitars, fiddles and banjos provided dance music ... an intriguing mix of Indian dance, Spanish steps, and New England gallops.

Horse races and cock fights interspersed with taffy candy pulls to enliven the tourists' days.

Sadly, the day of the beaver trade came to an end. Lord Byron in England began a new fad ... the silk hat. Soon the beaver hat went out of fashion, and the price of pelts dropped from \$6.00 to 75¢. By this time, however, trade and travel to New Mexico had increased. The Arkansas River forts, dominated by the Bents, switched over to buffalo hides and mercantile wagon trains. As much as \$250,000.00 in merchandise and gold went back and forth the 850 miles between Missouri and Santa Fe twice a year in Bents' trains. This was a large amount when one considers that an average wage was \$4.00 per month!

In the summer of 1846 a huge dust cloud was seen from the watch-tower at Bents Fort. It was General Kearney's Army of the West ... some 1800 men strong. They were on their way to seize New Mexico, Arizona, and went on to solidify California into the Union. Never before had anyone in this area seen so many persons all at one time. Excitement grew as the alarm bell above the watch-tower rang out. The six-pounder cannon was rolled out to fire a salute to the grand army. An over-eager employee put too much powder in the cannon. Bang! The cannon exploded with a roar, but luckily no one was hurt when it burst.

Later, when New Mexico was taken without a battle, Charles Bent was appointed the first governor of the New Mexico territory. He lasted five months until a rebellion occurred in Taos. He was scalped with a bowstring and it was tacked with brass nails to the door of his home in Taos. His wife and children escaped through a hole dug with a spoon in the adobe wall. The hole and spoon may still be seen today in Taos.

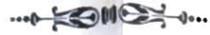
Tourists had to be careful of Indians "lifting their hair." All except a man named Belzie Dodd from St. Louis. He wore a toupee. On his tourist visit to Bents Fort, he noticed some Cheyenne Indians lounging by the main gates. Thinking to have some fun, he approached them, and casually lifted off his hair piece. The Indians ran screaming. Dodd was called "He Who Scalps Himself" and it was said that he was the only man who could travel safely alone on the frontier.

Practical jokes were often played on tourists. One of the commonest was to warn the "greenhorn" of the deadly rattlesnakes on the trail. Then at night when the victim was asleep, the men would take a long rope and slowly drag it across the chest of the sleeper. A handful of snake rattles shaken nearby woke the man. In the dark he would hear the rattles and feel the "snake" ... all 30 feet of it ... slowly pass over him. Afraid to move or call out, he'd lie there in silence, sweating with fear. Then came the inevitable "HEE-HAW."

For the early tourist who liked to hunt, Colorado was a paradise. Buffalo, deer, elk, wolves, mountain goats and sheep, black, brown and grizzly bear, and the fierce "Carcajou" or wolverine ... an evil-smelling, nasty tempered animal which resembles a cross between a bear and a badger. The wolverine and the grizzly were considered the two most fierce forest adversaries. Officially the wolf, grizzly, and the wolverine are not supposed to be still found in Colorado. But there's lots of virgin country left, and every year one hears stories. Mountain lions are common in Colorado. They've been seen recently near Red Rocks and Morrison ... less than 15 miles from downtown Denver. The same is true of bear.

With the westward expansion ... the finding of gold in California and Colorado, thousands of settlers came West. The trade forts either disappeared or grew into towns such as Ft. Lupton, Ft. Morgan, Pueblo, etc. Tourism in Colorado has grown every year since the railroad came. Today more than 5 million visitors come annually. But the old days of the mountain man west must really have been something!





This pamphlet is provided to your host for your enjoyment by the Arnolds, owners of The Fort. As amateur historians, Sam and Betty Arnold became interested in early Colorado forts. In 1962 they began construction of a full-scale true replica of Bents Fort near Morrison, 25 minutes from downtown Denver.

A crew of Spanish-American workers from Taos, New Mexico was brought to make the more than 80,000 mud and straw adobe bricks for the walls. Intensive research provided detailed information on its size and appearance. The Fort is located on highway 285 adjacent to a huge red rock outcropping, once populated by pre-historic Indians. Typical Spanish Colonial furniture and doors were made in Taos by a Spanish woodcarver. Special light fixtures, tile and door hardware were made in Mexico for The Fort. In every way the Arnolds have sought to keep a high degree of authenticity ... even to hand planing all woodwork.

The Arnolds' Fort has: A Restaurant (seating 180), a Bar or Cantina (seating 75), a Museum of the fur trade period, a Trade Room store, a Book Store featuring western Americana, a native medicinal herb collection, a western history reference library, living quarters for the Arnolds, a Trapper's Cabin of adobe chinked logs, an 1841 model actual-firing six-pounder cannon, swivel and naval mount half-pounders (fired for birthdays), a 200 lb. more-or-less pet black bear, a 350 lb. 1842 bell in the belfry, an Indian garden planted with rare seeds.

The Fort has been written up in LIFE, ESQUIRE (which said it was one of the three best eating places in Denver), INSTITUTIONS MAGAZINE (bible of the food industry), The Denver Post, Pueblo Chieftain, and other newspapers. It was chosen for a feature on Voice of America broadcast world-wide, and the Federal Government has placed Fort brochures in permanent consular libraries throughout the world as something which foreign visitors to the United States should see.

The Fort is open every day at 5 P.M., and at noon on Sundays. Complete dinner prices range from \$2.50 to \$5.95. Among the many items on the menu are: Blackfoot Indian aspen-cooked steaks (beef and often buffalo), Owl Woman's bacon-wrapped, aspen broiled mountain trout, Rocky Mt. Oysters, Bee-Nanas (mountain honey injected charbroiled in skin bananas), Carta Blanca beer from Mexico on draft, (served in $\frac{1}{2}$ yard coach driver's glasses), Hailstorm juleps in Mason Jars, Taos Lightning; sassafras and sarsaparilla teas, buffalo tongue (considered the greatest delicacy of the 19th century), boudin (buffalo sausage), jerky (sun dried beef), and "Susan's Bird Breasts" (special aspen broiled turkey breasts). Most everything is cooked to order. This takes a bit longer, but is well worth it in flavor.

If you will present this pamphlet at The Fort, it will be the pleasure of the management to give you a personal tour if you desire.

Reservations are advisable for dinner. The Fort's Denver number is 534-8977. It is reached most easily from downtown by traveling west on Highway 6 to the Wadsworth Ave. South turnoff; south on Wadsworth to its intersection with Highway 285; then follow Highway 285 to Morrison and beyond for two miles. The Fort is just beyond the big Red Rock at the brow of the hill.

