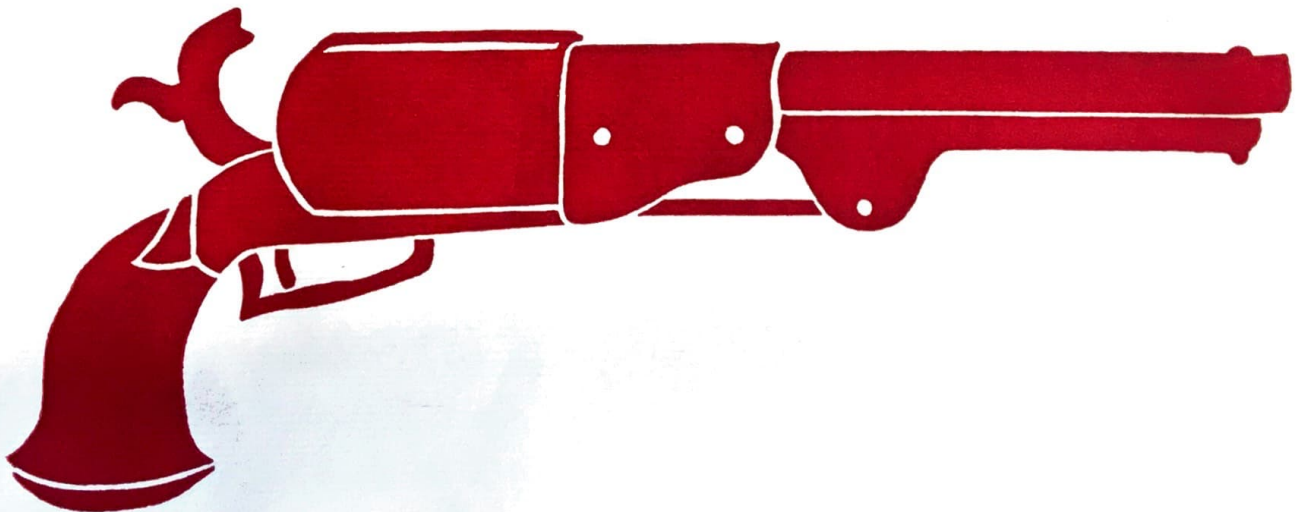


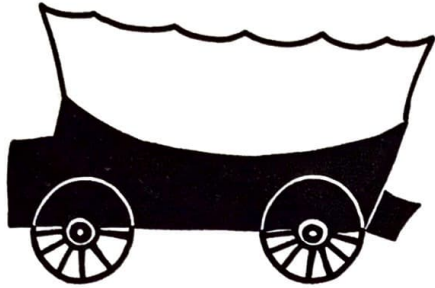
# Bent's Fort

by David Lavender

In the end the fort's location was moved down-river from Fountain Creek, but not as far as the Big Timbers—and evidence exists that William later regretted not following Yellow Wolf's exact suggestion. Why the Bents did not choose Big Timbers cannot be said. Undoubtedly Charles wanted the fort located at a point where he could haul supplies to it and then go on to New Mexico without retracing his steps; for this reason he was interested in a spot near the ford that led

to Timpas Creek and Raton Pass. Probably, too, he wanted to keep the fort as close as possible to the mountains without leaving good buffalo country, in order to make the establishment an outfitting center for the free trappers of the southern Rockies. The mouth of Purgatory Creek, with its trees and good grazing, would fit all the requirements. But unfortunately Purgatory Creek was on Mexican soil, open to interference from Santa Fe. Of necessity the brothers crossed to the American north bank of the Arkansas. Then they moved from the Purgatory a dozen miles upstream, between the sites of the future Colorado cities



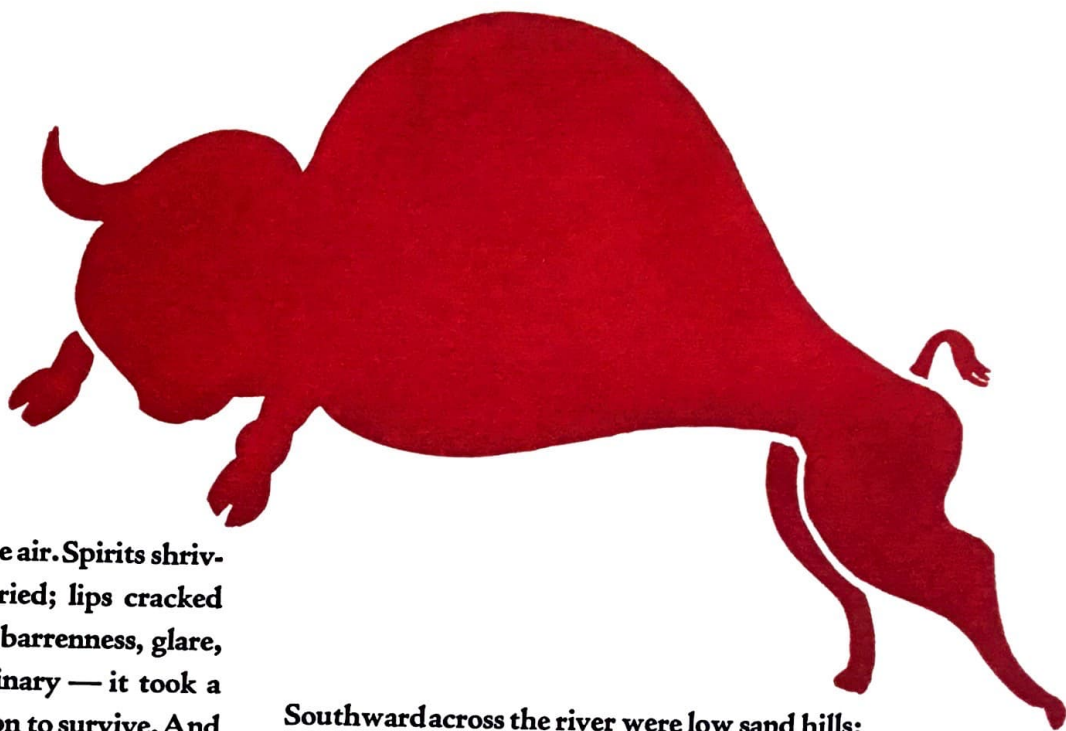


of Las Animas and La Junta. This brought them closer to the mountains and to the ford leading toward Raton Pass. Otherwise, it is difficult to account for the choice. The valley is sterile there; wood and grass were never abundant.

Indeed, the entire region is harsh, the center of what map makers long designated as the Great American Desert. Dry winds scour everlastingly; the evaporation rate is higher than at any other place in America save the deserts along the California-Mexico border. As a result more rain is needed to grow short grass on the southeastern plains of Colorado than, say, in Montana, and the rains are niggardly — a scant annual fifteen inches that come mostly from scattered, violent thunderstorms between April and June. Of the plains tributaries of the Ar-

kansas River, only Purgatory Creek flows more than intermittently. The others, rising in timber belts far north and south of the river, dwindle away in the sand, reappearing only in occasional, often bitter pools — except when flash floods roll torrents of mud between the low banks. Back from the bottomlands, where willows, rushes, wild plums, grapes, and cherries grow, vegetation shrinks to blade-leafed yucca, dwarf cactus, and the thick, shallow sod that once nurtured incredible hordes of buffalo, antelope, prairie dogs — and the wolves, coyotes, foxes, and soaring vultures which one way or another subsisted on these inexhaustible larders of meat.

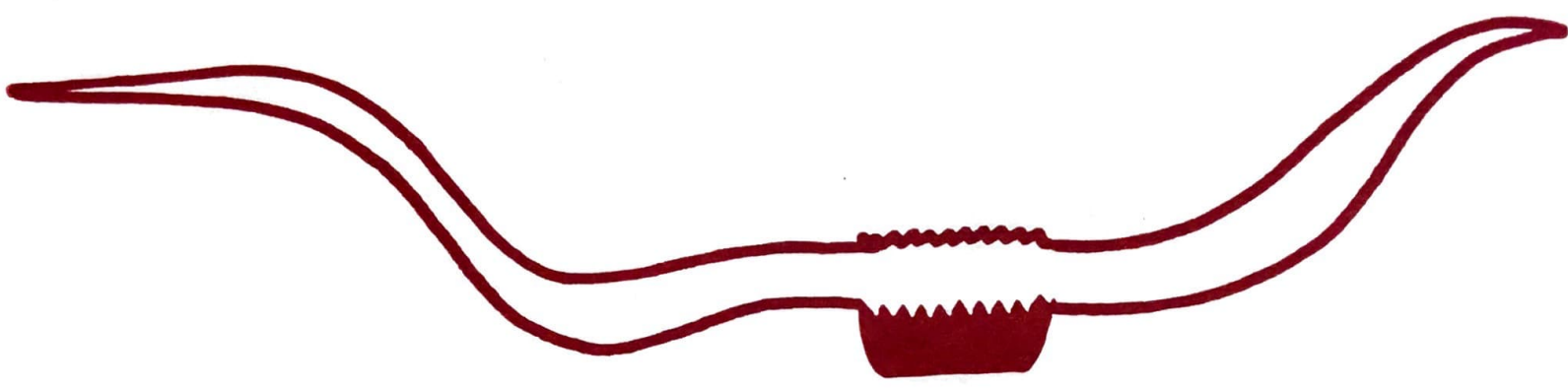
In winter northers howled. A sudden black cloud would pall the sky, prelude to screaming blasts of sand and temperatures that dropped as much as fifty degrees almost while a man was putting on his coat. There would come a whip of needle-like snow, then a swift clearing and dreadful cold. In summer temperatures climbed above the hundred-degree mark. Weird hot blasts, a few hundred feet to half a mile wide, flowed like invisible rivers between



narrow belts of more moderate air. Spirits shriveled as respiratory organs dried; lips cracked and eyes burned. Loneliness, barrenness, glare, dreads real and dreads imaginary — it took a particular kind of spiritual iron to survive. And yet, and yet . . . in spring a softness touched the air. Cumulus clouds piled unbelievable turrets above the far line of the mountains; meadowlarks and lark sparrows dripped golden song where coreopsis, poppies, and sunflowers blossomed; and through the deep green light of twilight sounded the boom of diving night-hawks. Utter freedom, utter independence. Some twisted it into license, treachery, cruelty. But some found a self-realization they could not discover in kindlier, more restricted lands, a wholeness which words have never been quite able to describe.

In those winds, under that pouring sun, the Bents picked out the site for their mud castle.

Southward across the river were low sand hills; along the north bank were small chalk bluffs and ledges of rock. Bordering the river were bottomlands that high water might flood but where in good seasons there might be enough grass for horses and perhaps even for cutting skimpy bits of hay. A hundred yards or so back from the stream (accounts vary, perhaps because the capricious Arkansas occasionally changed its channel) stood a gravelly bench commanding a long view of the valley. Here, the brothers said. And far southwest they saw the magnificent humps of the Spanish Peaks and far northwest the dim helmet of Pike's mountain, and north and south and east the edges of a rolling immensity whose full extent no man had yet completely grasped. Here. This was the heartland.



**Southwest Broadside Number Eight, designed and with drawings by Merle Armitage, printed by Cole-Holmquist for the friends of Lawrence Clark Powell at Los Angeles in the year 1955**

