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Bent's Old Fort

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William Bent Promoted Peace

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William Bent Promoted Peace

By LE ROY BOYD

BENT'S OLD FORT (C-SJ) — Except for the time Comanche raiders crossed the Arkansas River and drove off some stock at Bent's Old Fort the operator of the trading post, William Bent, maintained peace with the several Indian tribes of the high plains.

At the time of the raid Bent was away from the fort, and of course it cannot be known how he would have handled the horse thieves. And it may have been that the Comanches waited until they were sure Bent was away before they made their raid.

On the whole, according to William L. Featherstone, superintendent of the National Park Service Historic Site here, "from the point of view of his business, William Bent had to maintain friendly relations with the Indians."

Hostile Tribes Traded

Bent's diplomacy was such that he could do business with tribes hostile to each other when they met elsewhere. "This fact is striking," Featherstone says, "because, quite often, these same tribes would attack the wagon trains that were coming to or going from the fort."

Bent sought to keep the peace between the tribes partly for business reasons. "Complaints between tribes were often discussed in a room on the east side of the fort," Featherstone reports. "The crucial peace conference of 1840, which abolished the Cheyenne-Comanche differences, was held three miles below the fort, and the two tribes gave each other gifts they had purchased from Bent."

Bent Enjoyed Indians' Esteem

Not only did the business of the fort, isolated 300 miles from a settlement of any kind, depend on the peace Bent sought to maintain but there was also the safety of himself, his family and his employes to consider. His efforts towards that end — keeping peace on the plains — placed Bent in a position of great influence with them, "a position," Featherstone adds, "which he enjoyed until his death in 1869."

There is a biblical quotation which might have been applied to Bent: "Blessed are peacemakers." Bent's influence continued into the years following his death, and Bent's Old Fort later would become the part-time headquarters for the Upper Platte and Arkansas Indian Agency.

"It surely was no disadvantage that the fort was in Cheyenne territory and that William Bent had married a Cheyenne maiden," Featherstone says.

Fort Not Destroyed

Thomas Fitzpatrick became the first agent, and he set up headquarters in the fort which, contrary to the canard advanced by some writers, Bent did not destroy. Fitzpatrick, according to Featherstone, "was a former employe of the Bents, and he found this place most convenient for conducting the agency's business."

The Cheyennes and the Arapahoes were the major tribes that did business with the company that built the fort, also outfitted here before going into the mountains. And trade was maintained with Santa Fe and Taos, as well as with Missouri River points.

"The hides and pelts which the Indians offered in trade constituted the cornerstone of Bent, St. Vrain and Company's business," Featherstone says, "this business which consisted of buying and selling the products of the American East, the Spanish Southwest and vast Indian plains between."

Indian Trade Was Lost

In regard to the eventual decline of Bent's Fort Featherstone says, "When, later, westward expansion after the Mexican War brought in soldiers and settlers in great numbers, to the burning resentment of the Indian, it was the loss of the Indian trade as much as anything else that caused the dissolution of the firm and abandonment of the fort."

Considerable research into the causes for the decline of Bent's Old Fort has been done during the past two years by Dwight E. Stinson, NPS historian, and his reports will be incorporated with others being compiled by Jackson Moore, NPS archeologist.

The two men and Featherstone are getting together much information on the old trading post. Work will be undertaken this spring so that tourists this year may easily visit the site just off Colorado 194 between Las Animas and La Junta.

Forts. Bent's Fort