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Bent's Old Fort

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Hardy Pastimes Popular at Fort

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Hardy Pastimes Popular at Fort

By LeROY BOYD

BENT'S OLD FORT (C-SJ)—Two hardy pastimes—drinking and gambling—were the chief recreation at Bent's Old Fort, according to a report by William L. Featherstone, superintendent of this national historic site.

He refers to the observations of a 19-year-old bride, Susan Shelby Magoffin, who spent some time with her husband at the fort.

Susan remarked on the prevalence of gambling at the fort, both in the billiard room and at the race track. She even suspected there was a cock pit somewhere around. Her own servants, she wrote, "are gambling off their cloths (sic) till some of them are next to nudity."

"The billiard table in its second-story room must have been quite popular," Featherstone says. "We read also of a youthful employee at the fort constantly carrying a backgammon board with him. George Frederick Ruxton, in his 'Life in the Far West,' observed men playing with decks of euker and seven-up." The last of course does not refer to the soft drink.

Race Track

There was even a race track. Most plains Indians were ardent fans of horse racing, and like fans today they believed considerable interest could be added to the sport if a few bets were placed.

The race track is believed to have been somewhere west of the fort. No trace of it could be found during the archeological excavations. Featherstone explains that "some 2 feet of the surface soil were removed

in modern times in preparing the ground for irrigation."

And then of course there was liquor. Little mention has been found in the literature indicating the Bents sold much liquor to Indians. There is one passage which states they were the first to stop the practice because it cut down on their general trade with the tribes. Also, William Bent wanted to maintain peace between the tribes, and intoxicants made more difficult.

Taos Whisky

So far as whites were concerned, however, "there was, according to Ruxton, "a good supply of alcohol as well as Taos whisky." No one knows why Ruxton bothered to make the distinction.

Taos Lightning, as it was called, was well known to the Mountain Men and others in the west. It was made at a distillery owned by Simeon Tuttle near Taos.

It was potent stuff, and a reporter for the "Santa Fe Republican" said of it, "None of your old stuff, neither, but bran (sic) new, lacking six days of being a week old."

In spite of all that was said, though, life at the fort was not as bad as pictured by some. William Bent was always spoken of as a gentleman, hospitable and courteous, and he maintained law and order within his establishment. The social amenities were strictly observed. Army officers who were guests of Bent were amazed when their meals were served them on white linen. It was hard for them to believe that such would be done at an outpost so far from so-called civilization.