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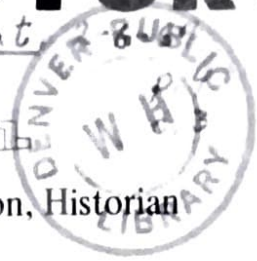
Bent's Old Fort

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Bent's Old Fort

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BENTS OLD FORT*In Junta Tribune-Democrat*

A series by Robert E. Davidson, Historian

A SHORT-LIVED PEACE

When William Bent first established his trading post on the Arkansas in 1833, almost constant warfare was being waged among the major tribes of the southern plains. The Indians were fighting to resolve a question which has always plagued mankind: who will control a particular piece of land or territory? This question was vitally important to these nomadic tribes because "ownership" of good hunting grounds was a cornerstone of their survival. Between 1826 and 1840, the Comanche and Cheyenne nations struggled bitterly over control of a vast area drained by the Arkansas River; an area which was also the center of Bent's trading activities. By the late 1830's, however, certain conditions existed which produced an atmosphere favorable for ending this costly conflict.

During U.S. Army expeditions under Leavenworth in 1834 and Dodge in 1835, the combatants had been contacted and urged to end hostilities. A smallpox epidemic that swept the plains in 1839 brought death to Indians by the thousands and tended to minimize the differences between tribes now faced with a common foe. Travel on the Santa Fe Trail increased steadily during the 1830's and the Indians began to realize that the ultimate threat to their existence did not come from neighboring tribes but from "civilized" men. Finally, William Bent's business activities were hindered by the constant warfare and he began a personal effort to bring the two sides together.

The opposing sides finally met near Bent's Fort during the summer of 1840. The Cheyenne and their Arapaho allies camped north of the Arkansas while the Comanche-Kiowa alliance remained on the south bank. Although only a sketchy record survives of the meeting, we do know that the talks were successful and that a treaty, which was to last far into the reservation period, finally resulted. Peace had finally come to the southern plains.

It was a short-lived peace, however, because a new threat soon appeared — the relentless westward push of civilization. Vast areas in the southwest had been opened up to settlement after the Mexican war of 1846 and a wave of immigrants began crossing the plains via the Sant Fe Trail. Added to this was the onslaught of fortune seekers created by the gold rushes of 1849 and 1859. And so by the 1860's, warfare was again a commonplace activity along the Arkansas. This time, though, the Indians were fighting a different enemy and they would not see peace again until they had been brought to the verge of extinction.