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Bent's Old Fort

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### Refuge at Fort Bent

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# Refuge at Fort Bent

*Fort Bent*



The scream of an exhausted rider and the savage yells of pursuing Indians were all it took to open the massive gates of Fort Bent, located on the sun-bleached trails that entered Colorado to the South. Situated on the north bank of the Arkansas River between the present towns of La Junta and Las Animas, the Fort was important to Colorado history for two reasons. For twenty years, it provided a place where travelers could take refuge and where commerce could be carried on without fear of Indian attack. More important, it was the pattern after which other forts were modeled—forts which later became the towns and cities of the state.

Second to the American Fur Company in size, Bent, St. Vrain and Co. employed nearly 100 trappers at the height of its activity. The main commodity was fur. The market was the eastern United States. The source of supply—the entire State of Colorado and northern New

Mexico. The company's most impressive achievement—Fort Bent.

The structure itself was a masterpiece of frontier ingenuity. The Bents and St. Vrain put into it their extensive knowledge of the climate, the country, and the habits of hostile Indians. It was almost as big as two baseball diamonds with walls four feet thick and fifteen feet high made from a mixture of adobe and wool. Two squat towers mounting cannon guarded the southeast and northwest corners of the Fort. An ice house was built near the river, and each winter it was filled with a supply of ice for summer use. Large walled corrals were constructed in back of the main fort for the horses and oxen.

But more picturesque than the exterior features were the people who gave life to Fort Bent. There were trappers and traders on their way to or from expeditions, travelers who stopped at the Fort before heading westward

along the Santa Fe Trail, and a motley variety of Indians who came to trade furs for food, whiskey, and trinkets. Noise was commonplace—the raucous voices of the trappers, shrieking Indian women, and the squalls of half-breed children. Occasionally, routine came to a standstill while the men took up posts along the wall to defend against parties of raiding braves.

But the colorful world of Fort Bent was doomed by the caprice of fashion. The fur markets dried up and, in 1852, the Fort was abandoned. Much had happened during its twenty years—much which had helped to shape men's lives.

Some of the travelers who visited Fort Bent later returned to Colorado—to dig for gold, to start farming, to open stores, to set up towns. Soon, civilization was flourishing along the foot of the Rockies.