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Bent's Old Fort

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Scarred Stagecoach has Obscure Past

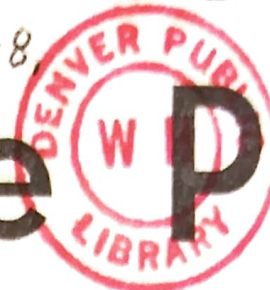
Pueblo Chieftain

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Scarred Stagecoach

Pueblo Chieftain, 8-18-68, p. 1C, c. 6-8

Has Obscure Past



By LE ROY BOYD

BENT'S OLD FORT (C-SJ)—

An old weather beaten, bullet scarred stagecoach now housed in a special shed at Bent's Old Fort, Historic Site of the National Park Service, is also liberally covered with many legends that may be of interest to the thousands of visitors who stop here each year.

The coach, still in good preservation, has gone through many vicissitudes in the more than 100 years of its history, including its names which among others have been the "Morning Star, Prairie Flower, White Fawn and Little Pittsburg." The name now located over its side door is "Overland Stage."

Robert E. "Bob" Davidson, a trained historian of the NPS, reports he has heard the many stories connected with the stage. Being a historian, he of course has attempted to substantiate them. "But," he says, "I haven't even been able to find a serial number on the vehicle. If a person had such a number and the records of the company that manufactured it were still in existence he could at least make a start on some research."

"Go West Young Man"

Stories that used to be told by old-timers in Denver 60 years ago, anyway, were that Horace

Greeley, famed New York newspaper man, rode this coach across the plains to the budding town at the foot of the Rockies in 1859. While out west, he was permitted to pan some gold from a "salted" placer, and then went back home to write his great editorial "Go West, Young Man, Go West."

Davidson says it is possible Greeley may have ridden in this particular coach. He adds, though, "Let's say he anyway rode in this kind of a stagecoach."

While the coach was in Las Animas for many years it was always known as the Greeley stagecoach. Another famous man who was said to have traveled in it was U.S. Grant. And to make the list even more interesting the names of Brett Harte and Mark Twain have been added to the possibles.

The coach was still in fairly good shape in the early 1900s when it was located up around the town of Greeley. The Bent County Fair Association of those years secured its possession and Sheriff John T. Gruber, who was also a member of the association board, took four horses up there and drove it overland to Las Animas.

That was sometime before 1911 for a picture that E. A. Thaxton, a longtime Las Animas

businessman, has on the wall of his office downtown, a picture that is showing the coach with the participants in a stage "holdup" taken in 1911.

The fairgrounds then were located south of the Santa Fe Railroad tracks, and the highlight of the fair in those early years was a Santa Fe Trail Day celebration. The 1911 picture includes a detachment of U.S. Marines in their uniforms of the day from the Fort Lyon Naval Hospital. Men dressed in war paint and feathers to represent Indians were on their horses.

The big feature of the day was the drive of the coach around the race track with the Indians yelling and whooping and shooting, and the Indians always lost the battle.

In time, the Bent County Fair Association of those days became defunct and the old fairgrounds no longer exist. For a while, the coach was kept on the farm of L. G. Kurtz, located two miles south of Las Animas. It was later brought to town and left in the open weather back of the J. T. Elder garage. Elder finally moved the coach inside to a big display window and refurbished it.

Storage charges mounted since the fair association no longer existed and it was finally put up at a sheriff's sale. Sheriff

...an Gates, father of Ken Curtis
the movie and TV star, who
will be appearing at this year's
Pueblo State Fair, knocked it
down to Elder for \$4,500.

Following Elder's death his
widow eventually transferred
title to it to the late Dr. G. E.
Calonge of La Junta. Dr. G. D.
Calonge inherited it at his fa-
ther's death. For a number of
years the stagecoach was on
display in a museum which was
part of the La Junta Chamber
of Commerce building on the
southwest corner of the cour-
thouse plaza.

With the construction of the
new Otero County Court House
the Chamber of Commerce rent
was raised, and the coach
was stored in the county shops.
In the meantime it was reported
that Dr. Calonge had given the
stagecoach to the Chamber of
Commerce.

Park Service Property

With the room in the county
shops being needed for equip-
ment, arrangements were made
with the National Park Service
for the stagecoach to be placed
on display here, and the special
shed was arranged for it. The
placement of the coach is espe-
cially appropriate since Bent's
Old Fort was at one time used
as a stage station.

According to the records that
had been compiled so far, the
original cost of the coach was
\$1,100 FOB Concord, N.H. In-
stead of springs, laminated bull-
hide straps were made on which
the body rests. When on the
road this gave the coach a
rocking motion. In this day of
wide seats in automobiles the
passenger seats seem rather
narrow but at least six passen-
gers could be carried inside.
The driver's seat was outside
and on top of the coach. Iron
railings were installed on the
roof for baggage.

The coach carried both mail
and passengers. The bullet holes
were said to have been incurred
during an attempted holdup.

An affidavit by Frank W. Nott
dated Dec. 12, 1929, states that
the "last run of the coach was
from South Platte to West Creek
mining camps."

But the old stagecoach also
made many a run after that
around the race track at Las
Animas as part of the original
Santa Fe Trail Day celebra-
tions.