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Bent's Old Fort

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Bent's Old Fort: Step back to the days of Fur Trade

Rocky Mountain News

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Bent's
Old Fort

PHOTOGRAPHER: GARY E. CASTLE

Bent's Old Fort was the most important outpost on the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail.

History runs deep in southeast Colorado

Autumn is the season to visit Big Bent Country, where the horizon spreads wide and history runs deep. Cool breezes sweep the prairies and the country quiet allows for daydreaming about the heroic past of Bent's Old Fort.

Big Bent Country — between Pueblo and Las Animas — covers a tapestry of communities rich in history, but each with its distinct flavor.

✓ The Koshare Indian Dancers (members of Boy Scout Explorer Post 2230 in La Junta) preserve Indian culture and lifestyle in authentic dances and a magnificent Indian Museum and Kiva at 115 W. 18th St. The museum has an excellent collection of Indian art and artifacts, both antique and contemporary.

The Koshares (Indian for funmaker or clown) started in February 1933 when the first scout group met regularly to study Indian lore. Since then 2,000 boys have taken part. The dancers perform in the museum kiva through the summer and at Christmas. Fees for their performances help finance the museum, open daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (1-5 p.m. after Labor Day).

✓ Pueblo claims "the most historic mile" along the Arkansas River. Historic markers designate the Taos Trail, the spot where Zebulon Pike erected a stockade, and El Pueblo, an adobe trading post built by fur traders in 1842. The State Historical Society operates a replica of El Pueblo in a museum at 905 S. Prairie Ave. (After Labor Day, hours are 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays.)

Pueblo County Historical Society Museum and Library are in the restored 1910 Vail Hotel on South Grand Avenue, now a home for retirees. Downstairs, the society's library has a large map collection and books on cowboys, ranching, railroads and ghost towns. The museum offers a railroad



PHOTOGRAPHER: JEANNE VARNELL

Rosemount Museum

collection and visiting exhibits. (Hours: 1-4 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays.)

Step into the life of an 1890s millionaire at Rosemount Victorian House Museum, 419 W. 14th St. The opulent home of John Thatcher, Pueblo banker and mercantile king, is a three-story mansion of 37 rooms built in 1891-93. It contains 25,000 square feet plus a 6,000-square-foot carriage house. Guided tours are given during museum hours (1-4 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and 2-4 p.m. Sundays). Don't miss lunch at Lindy's, a Victorian tearoom in the carriage house serving from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. weekdays.

✓ Rocky Ford is proud to be going to seed. Long known as the Melon Capital of the World, this farm and ranch community in southeastern Colorado also is gaining a title as Zinnia Capital. You've heard of the famous Rocky Ford cantaloupes, but have you ever bought one fresh at a fruit stand? You won't believe your taste buds. Now, a third of the United States' zinnia seed is grown around Rocky Ford. In season, acre after acre blazes with hot zinnia colors produced by Burrell's Better Seeds.

You can share in the produce harvest with a stop at Rocky Ford's many roadside stands. Pick up a list of stands at the Rocky Ford Chamber of Commerce.

IF YOU GO

Where to stay: La Junta — Capri Motel. Full service; 60 rooms. (719) 384-2571. Luxury 8 Inn. Lodging only, but newer. (719) 384-4408.

Las Animas: Bent's Fort Inn (Best Western), 13 miles east of Bent's Fort on U.S. 50. (800) 528-1234.

Pueblo: Holiday Inn Pueblo, 4001 N. Elizabeth. AAA 3-diamond rating; 193 units; full service; (719) 543-8050. Best Western Inn at Pueblo West, 201 S. McCullough Blvd. AAA rated; 80 units; full service. (800) 528-1234.

Where to eat: Among the many Mexican restaurants in La Junta are Rosita's, El Cid, Christina's, La Azteca and El Camino. In Rocky Ford, try Casa Luz, Fiesta Cafe and Melon Valley Inn. In Pueblo, Lindy's in the Rosemount carriage house is recommended for lunch.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Comanche National Grasslands, south of La Junta on Colorado 109. The grasslands, which cover 419,000 acres, are as close as you come to the original country along the 1,000-mile Santa Fe Trail. Wildlife, wildflowers, birds and archeology features. Headquarters at 1321 E. Third St., Rocky Ford.

John Martin Reservoir, east of Las Animas, for fishing, boating, camping, water skiing.

Lake Pueblo, 60 miles of shoreline, water sports.

EVENTS

Colorado State Fair, through Sept. 4 at Pueblo Fairgrounds. Livestock and cultural exhibits, grandstand entertainment, rodeo and carnival rides.

Early Settlers Day, Sept. 9, La Junta. Craft and food booths, beer garden, fiddlers' contests, parade, music, dancing. Free.

Plaza de los Leones, Sept. 16-17, honors Walsenburg's founding family. Parade, booths, food. Free.

Oktoberfest, Sept. 23, Union Avenue, Pueblo.

Oktoberfest, Sept. 30-Oct. 1, Rocky Ford.

Oktoberfest, Oct. 7, La Veta.

Step back
to the days
of fur trade

Stories by Jeanne Varnell

LA JUNTA — If you ever dreamed of sitting around a campfire with the likes of Kit Carson, John C. Fremont, William Bent and the great Cheyenne chiefs, you can come close Labor Day weekend Friday, Sept. 4 at Bent's Old Fort.

During the Fur Trade Encampment staged by the United States Park Service, as many as 600 fur-trade "enactors" from across the country will converge on the fort, pitch tents around the walls and step back into the everyday lives of fur traders and Indians.

"This historical re-creation of the 1846 lifestyle will be the most accurate fur-trade re-enactment in the United States," says chief ranger William Gwaltney.

Bent's Old Fort was the most important outpost on the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail. After the Mexican War, when the Indian trade faded, Bent abandoned his fort. The walls were used as a stage station and travelers' shelter, then neighbors carted off its adobe blocks for their own buildings.

In 1976, the Park Service built a replica of Bent's Fort on its original foundation. As you approach the gates, you can picture how magnificent it appeared to weary travelers who had ridden 600 miles on the Santa Fe Trail with never a roof overhead.

Inside the walls, life goes on as it did in the 1840s, heyday of the Indian trade. Guides in authentic costumes depict the fort's occupants, and rooms are furnished as in the days of Owl Woman, Bent's first wife.

This year's encampment will be larger and more structured than the fort's previous rendezvous. Many traders will live in the fort; trappers will jury-rig their shelters outside the walls, and Utes and Kiowas will be at home in their tepees. Military enactors include American and Mexican dragoon soldiers of the 1840s. Admission is \$3 a carload or \$1 a person (everyone under 16 or older than 62 gets in free.) Hours: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

How to get there: Drive south from Denver on Interstate 25 to Pueblo, 112 miles. In Pueblo, turn east onto U.S. 50 to Rocky Ford, 64 miles; continue east on 50 to La Junta, about 5 miles. In La Junta take Colorado 194 across the Arkansas River and follow the signs to Bent's Old Fort, 8 miles.

Other events at Bent's Fort: Sept. 16 — Diez y Seis de Septiembre is a celebration of Mexican Independence and the contributions of Hispanic Americans. This year's event will feature all kinds of traditional celebrations and interpretive programs. Dec. 15-16 — An 1846 Christmas will feature 20 history re-enactors who live and cook period foods in the fort's rooms. Other holiday events at the fort: a yule hunt, candlelight tours, a Posadas Pageant and Revillon, a loud racket and parade at midnight Christmas Eve.

Information: (719) 384-2597.

Jeanne Varnell is a freelance writer living in Lakewood.