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Bent's Old Fort

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Meals at Bent's Old Fort Were Rated Quite Highly

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Meals at Bent's Old Fort Were Rated Quite Highly

Fort. Bent's fort

By LE ROY BOYD

BENT'S OLD FORT (C-SJ)
— There was no supermarket nearby in the hey-day of Bent's Old Fort where a person could dash in to get something for supper, and of course there were no such things as frozen meats and vegetables, cake mixes or rolls all ready to be popped into the oven.

"All in all, though," William L. Featherstone, superintendent of the National Historic Site here, reports, "mealtime at Bent's Fort seems to have something to look forward to."

Describing the situation Featherstone says, "In our day when a well stocked supermarket is not over an hour from the remotest ranch home, we don't give much thought to what we'd do for food if we lived hundreds of miles from the nearest store with no faster transportation than a freight wagon pulled by oxen or mules. Such was the case at Bent's Fort, but it didn't seem to bother anyone. And we have no record of the food situation ever being critical."

Fare Was Varied

The findings of Dwight E. Stinson, National Park Service historian, and Jackson W.

Moore, archeologist, over the past two years shed some interesting light on the subject. While one might at first think living at the old trading post must have been somewhat primitive with many items missing from the usual grocery list yet John C. Fremont, the explorer, was able to pick up macaroni to add to the diet of his men. This gives an insight into William Bent's versatility when it came to ordering supplies for his stores.

"The diet of those living at Bent's Fort was based on buffalo meat," Featherstone says. "Kit Carson and others were hired at times specifically to hunt buffalo. But this could be varied with meat from cows, sheep, goats and barnyard fowl. Fish were also obtained from the river a hundred yards away."

Wine Plentiful

Coffee was a common drink at meals, and there was also a good supply of wine. Water came from a well in a basement room on the west side and was described as sweet and good. Staples usually on hand included molasses, sugar and salt.

"Our style of living," a correspondent for the "St. Louis Weekly Reveille" wrote while staying at the fort, "is superior to that of ordinary Indian traders, having abundance of substantial. Flour, corn, beans and whisky we get from the Spanish settlements. Milk, poultry, butter, eggs, etc., are kind of indigenous affairs. All we lack is 'murphys,' which we shall try to raise the coming season. There were 12 cows kept at the fort to furnish milk for the winter, and now there are 30 that could be put in requisition, if necessary. The company keeps a large stock of cattle, employing Mexicans to herd them."

Among visitors who remarked especially on the excellent fare were Capt. Phillip St. George Cooke of the Army, and Francis Parkman of Boston.

The latter after accepting an invitation to dinner, wrote, "To our admiration, we found a table laid with a white cloth, with castors in the middle and chairs placed around it."

Pumpkin Pies Popular

One of the most famed persons permanently at the fort was Charlotte whom George Rux-

ton, the English traveler, described as a "fair lady of colour." She presided over the culinary department and "was celebrated from Long's Peak to the Cumbres Espanolas for slap-jacks and pumpkin pies."

Among the items found in the recent investigations which add to the information concerning William Bent's table, according to Featherstone, have been bone handles of eating utensils and several iron cooking pots.

"There was a large fireplace and hearth in a room in the southeast corner which, we feel was the kitchen," Featherstone says, "and close by was the largest room in the Fort which was probably used as a dining room." He adds, "Dinnerware too, was attractive, for some of the broken pieces found by the archeologist are quite colorful especially the copper-lustrated ware."

Many of these artifacts may now be seen here in the laboratory which has been constructed near the office of the National Park Service. The site may be reached on Colorado 199 between Las Animas and La Junta.