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Bent's Old Fort

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### Trading Post Aided Area in Many Ways

Rocky Mountain News

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**Bent's Old Fort—Last of a Series**

# Trading Post Aided Area in Many Ways



Aerial view shows excavations at Bent's Old Fort. Foundation outlines of walls and rooms are visible. The trenches were dug during the search for historical artifacts. The fort, which operated as a trading post and defense bastion between 1833 and 1849, is being re-stored as a national historic site.

By W. T. LITTLE

*Rocky Mountain News Writer*

**BENT'S OLD FORT, July 5**—In its 16 years of active operation, Bent's old Fort, 1833 to 1849, was primarily a trading post—the most important one in this part of the frontier.

But it was more than that. It was a social center, a resting place for the travelers and wagon trains using the Santa Fe Trail, a repair depot, a spot to live it up with a few quaffs of good whisky, although William Bent frowned on over-indulgence.

Army units frequently stopped at the fort, and it served as a defense against marauding bands of Indians, although generally there was little Indian trouble.

## Resident Manager

The top of the high wall surrounding the corral or cattle yard was planted with cactus, which

were regularly watered and produced red and white flowers. The builders evidently had something of an artistic touch.

William Bent was the resident manager of the operation. Charles Bent directed many of the financial arrangements through St. Louis banks, and he also served with the third partner in the venture, Ceran St. Vrain, in running mercantile stores in Santa Fe and Taos and in making trips to carry on trades with the Indians and Mexicans.

Wrote one historian, "They were mighty men whose will was prairie law, who could sway whole

tribes, who knew Indians and Mexicans as few others did." William Bent married Owl Woman, the daughter of a Cheyenne chief, and this gave him a strong influence in dealing with the Indians.

"It was a profitable operation during its peak years, according to information gained through research by acting Park Supt. Dwight E. Stinson and Doyle Dombaugh, seasonal historian at the fort.

It was a self-sufficient institution that employed about 60 persons including such skilled workmen as wheelwrights, carpenters, gunsmiths and blacksmiths. The

fort contained living quarters, shops, kitchens and rooms rented to travelers.

## *Rebuilt Like Original*

Water was supplied from a fine well, which was rediscovered during the recent excavation work by the U.S. National Park Service.

The agency, which spent two years in archaeological exploration and study, is developing Old Bent's Fort as a historic site. The old fort will be rebuilt on original plans and to exact scale. It is due to be completed in 1968.

Because of its location in the heart of the Indian country, the

post served as an important location for meetings between the Indians and U.S. Government officials.

In 1845, with the approach of the Mexican War, the fort was designated as the advance base for invasion of what is now New Mexico. It became the rendezvous for Gen. Stephen Kearny's invading Army of the West. At one time, 1600 dragoons and Missouri volunteers were quar-tered there.

200 wagons loaded with supplies used it as a base.



# Bent's Fort Aided Area in Many Ways



(Continued from Preceding Page)

This marked the beginning of the end for the fort. Trade fell off and Charles Bent, appointed governor of the newly won territory of New Mexico, was killed in an uprising in Taos.

## *Cholera Final Blow*

St. Vrain sold his interest to William Bent, and the final blow came in 1849 when cholera, probably brought by emigrants, spread through the area. Indian tribes were seriously affected.

William Bent was ready to call it quits. He loaded his supplies and furnishings into wagons, took a few employes and moved out. He set fire to the store rooms and powder magazine and left.

Bent moved 38 miles down the Arkansas River and established Bent's New Fort, a large stone trading post. Although his business never achieved its earlier success, he remained in business until the outbreak of the Civil War, then moved to a ranch where he died in 1869.

But Bent's Old Fort still had some use. The burned part of

the structure was cleaned out and it became a stage stop. It served until the coming of the railroads. Near the old outpost stands a grave marker. Here is buried Edward Dorris, one of the stage coach employes of the Barlow and Sanderson line. He died at the fort in 1865 at age 30.

## *Fell Into Disrepair*

With the fort abandoned for good, it began to fall into disrepair, as its adobe walls collapsed under the stress of storms and depredations. Stinson said ranchers of the area contributed to the collapse by removing the adobe bricks for their own use. Some of the area around the fort, notably the large corral section, was plowed up and cultivated.

"We owe a great debt to the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) who fought to preserve the last remains," said Stinson. "They erected a marker there in 1910."

Now, through the skilled work of the Park Service, Bent's Fort will rise from the ruins to again become an important location.

**THE END**

William Bent was a co-founder of Bent's Fort along with his brother, Charles, and Ceran St. Vrain. William served as resident manager of the post, while the other two partners took care of trading activities in the far-flung empire.