Bent's Fort a Fortress in the West

The Indian Trader

Forts. Bent's fort

BENT'S FORT

A Fortress In The West

The traveler might come upon it by river, coming down the Arkansas after a season of trapping furs. Or the first sight of the place might come after days of slogging along behind a wagon, the oxen kicking up dust and the heat intense. It must have seemed like a mirage to some, this medieval-style fort, rising up out of the prairie, with its battlements and towers topped by a belfry flying the American Flag. It was a refuge from the heat, from the monotony of travel, from the lonliness of wilderness life.

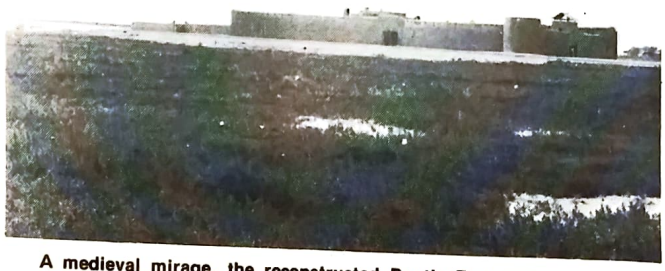
Bent's Fort was the epitome of the fortified trading post that appeared here and there on the frontier in the years when trapping and trading flourished with Taos as a base. Strategically located, a good post could offer a trading station for Indian tribes, a place to bring furs for mountain men and a re-stocking point for settlers and travelers. *From such a point, engagés, or hired, resident trappers and traders could go forth and bring in loads of pelts. And the occasional army force chasing across the west bringing* order of a sort to the frontier could get provisions at a well-stocked place.

Fortified trading posts were never very numerous; but a good location might attract several traders to one area. These posts spanned the period from the time when the lone peddlar-trader went to the Indians with a caravan of goods which he traded for furs, to the era when the furs were no more to be had in great numbers, and provisioning settlers was the chief business of traders. In this brief, glamorous period, lasting perhaps twenty-five years at most, Bent's Fort was one of the most successful and colorful outposts in the West.

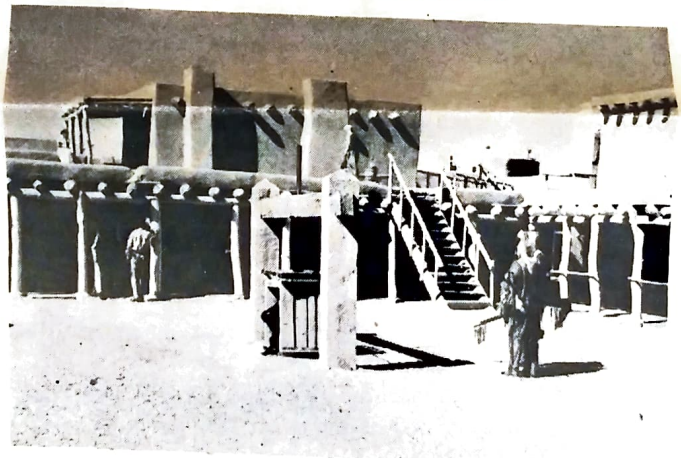
There is some doubt about the actual date the fort was built. Surmises vary between 1829 and 1834, but most seem to feel that the structure was erected in 1832 and 1833, with finishing touches added in 1834. It was the result of a bold decision on the part of some traders who were not prospering at the independent sort of trade.

Two brothers, Charles and William Bent, went west in the years after 1824 and set themselves up as independent traders. They had built a small post at the present site of Pueblo, Colorado in 1829, a place that was little more than a hut with a palisade around it. Trade was slow.

Charles went to Taos to restock his supplies and there met Ceran St. Vrain, with whom he struck up an immediate friendship. Both men were tough, shrewd and business-oriented. St. Vrain was a charming man, suave with the ladies and yet a man's man too. Charles Bent was stocky, fearless, cocky and independent. The Indians respected him and felt he was honest, but they often laughed at him behind his back. He wore a white hat and was called White Hat by the Cheyennes.



A medieval mirage, the reconstructed Bent's Fort appears over the horizon between Las Animas and La Junta, Colorado.



Central court of Bent's Fort. Excavated in 1954, it is now a National Historical site.

With the decline of fur trade after 1840 and new routes which bypassed him, William Bent set fire to his fort and left the area.

The two men formed a partnership, and William the younger brother, approved and joined in. William was not the businessman that the other two were, but he became the most well-known of the partners. William was a natural frontiersman. He knew his way around the woods, and he spoke Cheyenne and enjoyed being with the Indians. He married Owl Woman, daughter of White Thunder, one of the Cheyenne chiefs. Later after her death, he married her sister, Yellow Woman. The Indians loved him, and he had their complete respect. He was fair and equitable in his dealings with everyone who came into his fort, and he often was asked to settle possible disputes.

The three men picked a location on the North bank of the Arkansas River, at a most strategic point. The Santa Fe trail went by that place so that those people going west naturally stopped there. It was north of Taos, and south of the mountain hunting grounds. To the west were more mountains; to the east, the buffalo hunting grounds. *It was within easy access of many Indian tribes: the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Sioux, Utes, Jicarilla Apaches, Kiowas and Comanches.*

The Cheyenne tribe actually split, and one group moved south to live near the fort, and with them came a group of Arapaho. St. Vrain eventually established a fort on the Platte River to accommodate the northern branches of these tribes.

William Bent, even after his fort was constructed, kept up his relationship with the Cheyennes. He and his wife lived at the fort, but they kept a lodge with the tribe and often spent time there.

The fort was built of Adobe bricks, made at the site and sun-baked. It surmounted a small rise near the river, with the river running to the rear of the building. In all directions was a clear view. The building was a large rectangle, with an adjacent corral yard to one side angling out slightly. The odd angle of the wall may have been the result of a surveyor's error; the fort faced north-north-east and was trapezoidal. Another corral might have been added later to the rear of the fort. In case of attack the animals that were such a large element of trade could be moved inside and protected.

The walls were three feet thick at the base around the outside of the fort, and the large round towers at the corners had walls that were sixteen inches thick, as did the inside rooms. The corner towers allowed men to see attackers from any direction. Near the tops of the walls were loopholes so that men could shoot down in any direction.

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Cactus was planted along the tops of the walls to discourage scaling attackers. It was similar to a primitive fortress of the middle ages in many respects. Inside, the rooms opened onto a central court, in the Spanish manner. The fort was approximately 122 by 150 feet.

There were some upstairs rooms, reached by ladders, where people could live, and the well for the fort and its personnel was inside the building, in the trading room.

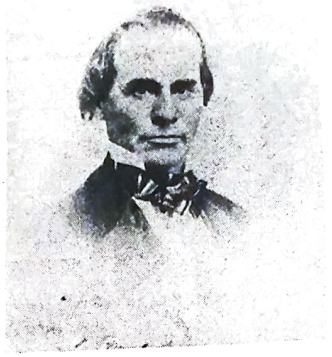
The twenty-two rooms that opened onto the central court housed supplies, the trading operation, stores and goods, and a number of people. The rooms were plastered gaily in white, red and yellow, and the accommodations were much better than those at other posts, albeit primitive.

A person arriving at Bent's Fort (or Bent's Old Fort, as many called it) could not help but be excited by the prospect. After days of jarring, gritty travel, he would see the flag and the belfry over the horizon, growing larger with the approach. Soon the bustle of activity on the outskirts of the fort would become apparent, with many people going and coming. Some would be bringing in trade goods or furs, others, meat they had killed for the Fort's larder. Perhaps Kit Carson, resident hunter at the fort, would ride alongside and talk a while. Carson went on to found his own town, Carson City, but was the resident hunter for the Bents and St. Vrain

Charles Bent

for several years. As one neared the fort, perhaps he would see a vista of tipis of Indians encamped outside the gate in one of their trading visits. This must have been a thrilling sight; Charles Bent described it in a letter: "1500 lodges of Indians including Aripihoes, Cheyeans & Sioux, and if the Cumanches mette them thare as they have agreed, thare will be nearly double that number of lodges."

Riding in the great front gate was like riding through a tunnel, cool and suddenly dark after the blazing sun. The passage went not only through the wall, but under rooms on the second floor, so it was twenty feet long. The rider would emerge in the plaza. The rooms of the fort facing into this courtyard with an overhung walkway in front of them. Above, in the belfry, two bald eagles penned behind bars would squawk raucously. The place was alive with people in its prime. In a busy trading time there might be over a hundred people busy around the fort, some living there and some encamped outside. There were the traders, the engagés, hired by the Bents and St. Vrain to go to the Indians, and the permanent, resident traders and clerks. There were those in charge of supply, the blacksmiths and wheelwrights necessary for repairs and maintenance of travelers' vehicles and horses. There were teamsters and drovers and herders and



William Bent

laborers and their wives and children, usually Indian. And there were cooks, commanded for a time by a most remarkable black woman named Charlotte. Many visitors commented on the "fair lady of color", and Charlotte told one that she was "de onlee lady in de damn Injun country."

In the central plaza was a small cannon and the large press that squeezed a number of buffalo robes into an easily managed package.

The traveler would move to the trading room, to the left of the entrance and all along the side of the yard. This room was 73 feet by 20 feet, and contained all the displays of merchandise for trade. Perhaps, if the traveler were a distinguished person from the East, he would be given a place to stay in one of the fort's rooms and taken to William Bent's quarters to be introduced. Bent might regale him with tales of the adventures in and around the fort over dinner, and afterward they might play billiards on Bent's imported billiard table.

William Bent was the guiding

Ceran St. Vrain

spirit behind the fort. St. Vrain left the Bents, although remaining partners until 1849, to start a fort closer to the Rockies. The trio financed the venture, which was never as successful as Bent's Fort. And when General Kearny came through with his men to enforce the annexation of New Mexico, he appointed Charles Bent to be territorial governor of the new state. In 1847 Charles was scalped in Taos by angry Indians who were revolting against the American presence in their land.

The reasons for the success of Bent's Fort and for its eventual decline demonstrate the essentials of trading history. The fort flourished in the years when the fur trade peaked, when many men were seeking their fortunes by trapping and when the Indians were eager to exchange their furs and buffalo robes with the white traders. A central location was helpful in collecting the fruits of these people's labors. But this would not have ensured success for the Bents, alone. They were clever men, and they very carefully, for as long as possible, preserved a delicate balance. They were able to import over the Santa Fe trail a good quality of supplies from Robert Campbell of St. Louis. Quantity was important too, because they had to gauge the number of customers for the fort carefully. They also received supplies from Taos such as flour and horses, and some liquor. William Bent was not in favor of the use of liquor in trade, but there must have been a considerable amount pass through the fort, because General Kearny suggested to Washington that a government agent be installed at the fort to curtail the supply of liquor to the north.

Goods received in trade were stored for a while at the fort, but were moved as quickly as possible to their appointed market. The delicate stability of the trading system was preserved so well that such visitors as Kearny and all his troops found ample supplies waiting for them.

By 1838 the competition for the fur market was at its peak, and the Bents and St. Vrain were forced to make an agreement with the American Fur Company that they would

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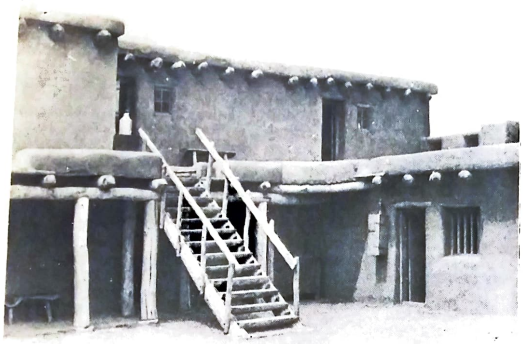


stay to the south of the South Platte if the American Fur men would stay to the north of the North Platte. This put the Bents and St. Vrain on an equal footing with the great company of John J. Astor.

Traders went out in long processions from the fort, their pack trains loaded with flannel and calico, powder and balls, Green River knives, copper and brass wire, iron pots and hoop iron for making arrowheads, coffee, flour, tobacco and sugar, and such attractive trinkets as vermillion, abalone shells, beads, awls, combs, ribbons, mirrors, brass rivets or tacks and blankets. Not only were the English wool blankets popular, but also the Cheyenne women fancied Navajo blankets for their water-repelling features.

For short trips, lasting only a day or two, a trader might load up a wagon with as much goods as he could lash aboard, and venture to a nearby group of Indians. He would return with his wagon piled with buffalo robes, preferably those taken in the fall, and with strings of horses tied behind.

The Bents hired trappers and traders to work for them, as did many of the large posts. These were called engagés, following the custom of the Hudson's Bay Company with their many French employees.

But the Bents had a way of making their traders happy. A hired trader was considered one step lower on the social scale than an independent trader, and was paid and treated accordingly in most places. The Bents, in order to keep their traders happy, raised them a degree in the social scale. This was considered revolutionary in the West of those days.

Such traders as John Smith, a famous western figure, worked for Bent. Smith was married to a Cheyenne woman and spoke the language fluently. He enlisted the aid of his Cheyenne friends to police the borders and keep any independent Mexican traders from coming into the Bent's territory. The young Cheyennes enjoyed this kind of hunting immensely, and entered in with gusto.

There were some other traders in the neighborhood of Bent's Fort, but in its time of plenty they were little or no competition. Gantt and Blackwell had a post nearby where they liberally dispensed Taos Lightning to attract Indians from Bent's Fort. Simpson, Doyle and Parkman set up a business at Pueblo in a sloppily made structure that did not last as their trade did not last. And a man named Tharp sold "whiskey and a rug or two" but never did enough business to harm the Bent's operation.

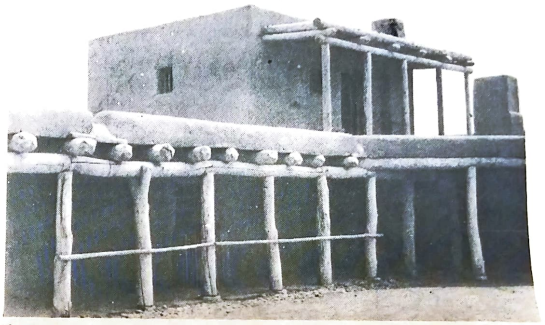
But after 1840 the fur trade suffered a decline. There may have still been many beaver in the mountains to the west, but the market dwindled as the demand for fur hats fell off. The annexation of New Mexico in 1846 led to a flood of immigrants from the States, but time elapsed before this new wave of potential customers came. The Fort, between 1842 and 1847 steadily lost ground. New routes by passed the area, and the Indians were being pressed into other places to live. The army, stationed in the area from time to time, offered little income as the men were paid next to nothing. Finally, on August 21, 1849, William Bent moved his family out of the fort, loaded everything of value on his wagons, let the few remaining employees go, and set fire to the building. As the smoke rose into the air, he turned his head away and rode off.

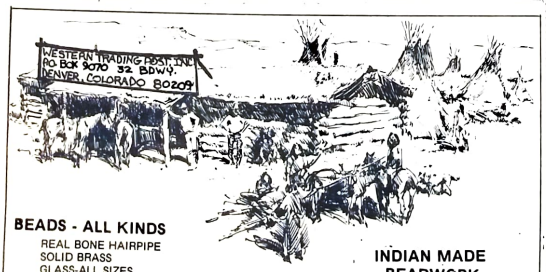
He probably expected the whole structure to burn down. There is even a persistent rumor that he set a trail of gun powder to the main powder room to blow the place up, but archaeological studies have disproved this. The adobe was not easily burned, however, and the fire was contained in one area. Later, the gate was enlarged and the place was used as a stage-coach stop, and still later someone used it in a half-wrecked form as a corral. It was excavated in 1954 by Herbert W. Dick and now is a National Historical Site, off the road betwen Las Animas and La Junta, Colorado.

St. Vrain stayed in Taos and did business there, while William Bent went on to trade independently and eventually build another fort in another place.

But with the fire in Bent's Old Fort, the era of the fortified trading post was just about over. For a short while trade was so slow that what little there was fell to itinerant Mexicans. Then, with the rise in numbers of settlers headed to new lands, the new kind of trade grew up; supplies for these people were dispensed mostly from wayside towns.

The Indians were contained, gradually, by various policies, enabling the new lands to go to these immigrants; with reservation life came the reservation traders, who lived in far away places, speaking the language of their Indians and dealing, often warily, with them. A new era had begun.





dry, it would be placed on a deer hide by the woman of the lodge, and a second deer hide would be placed on top of it. Then the Indian woman would tramp about on the top hide to compact the jerky and break it up so that it could be easily stored in parfleches.

When Elizabeth Clifford makes wahanpi, she covers the dried meat with cold water and simmers it slowly for one or two hours to make the meat tender and juicy. Near the end of the cooking, she adds chunked potatoes and onions and, if necessary, more salt. She sometimes adds a piece of salt pork or bacon for additional flavor.

Her grandmother would have added wild onions to the soup, and either wild potatoes or jerusalem artichokes, the roots of one species of wild sunflower.

When the jerky is simmering in the pot, Elizabeth starts the wojapi. She has previously pounded the choke cherries with their pits, formed them into round patties, and dried them in the sun. Now she covers them with water for a few minutes and breaks them up with a spoon.

Enough water to cover the fruit twice is added and this is simmered with sugar to taste for fifteen or twenty minutes, or until the patties are all disintegrated. The amount of sugar will vary according to the taste of the cook, as well as the natural sweetness of the fruit which differs from year to year because of variations in sunshine and rain. *Perhaps a half cup of sugar added to six choke cherry patties would be an average amount. The pudding emits a delicious odor while it is simmering and being stirred.*

A thickening is added near the end of the cooking by mixing one or two tablespoons of flour with water and stirring it into the fruit. At this point the wojapi must be stirred constantly to prevent lumpiness and it can be kept boiling until the desired thickness is obtained. A typical wojapi would be slightly thinner than chocolate pudding. When finished, the wojapi may be served warm or cold.

Elizabeth likes to pound cherries on a cherry grinding stone in the old way. The stone is placed in a rawhide bowl to catch any berries that fall off the stone, and the berries are placed on the stone, a handful at a time. A granite hammer is used to pound the cherries until the pits and pulp are pulverized. The pulp is then formed into patties the size of a small hamburger and sun dried on an oven rack or basket.

Sometimes Elizabeth will put the cherries through a meat grinder instead of using the pounding stone. This does not pulverize the pits as finely, so she will sometimes pass the pulp through a strainer to eliminate the coarser pits after the patties are softened with water.

In the days of her grandmother, large quantities of fruit patties were made when the berries were ripe. After they were dried, they would keep indefinitely and the winter's food supply would be stored in parfleche bags or boxes, which would be packed on travois baskets when the village moved.

Berry patties could be made with any wild fruit. Wild plums, buffalo berries, gooseberries, june berries, raspberries, blackberries and rose hips were commonly used.

The sap of the box elder, birch or maple tree was used to add sweetening before sugar was available, and the thickening was made from arrowroot.

Wigli un ka 'ga pi, or Sioux fry bread, is essentially a biscuit dough which is fried on top of the stove in a heavy skillet. The dough is made by combining 3½ cups flour, 2 level teaspoons of baking powder, 1 level teaspoon of salt, 2 heaping teaspoons of sugar, approximately two cups of milk and 1 heaping tablespoon of lard melted.

Elizabeth mixes the dry ingredients together, adds a little milk, and then works in the melted lard. Enough of the remaining milk is added to make a biscuit-like dough.

The dough may be rolled out or pulled into six or eight inch circles, slashed two or three times down the middle with a knife to allow the fat of the frying pan to bubble through, and fried whole. Or it may be rolled out and cut into smaller rectangles or triangles and fried with a gash in the center of each piece.

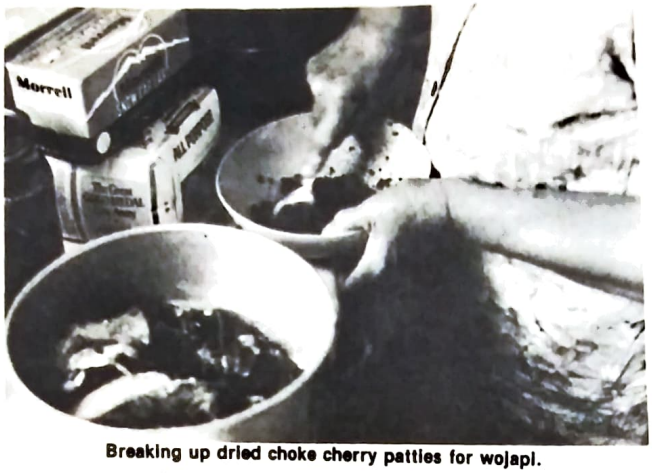
The frying skillet should be heavy cast iron and lard should be melted to depth of about a half inch. To test that the lard is hot enough, Elizabeth drops a tiny chunk of fry bread into the skillet. If the fat bubbles immediately around the dough, it is ready.

Elizabeth Clifford has had plenty of experience making wigli un ka 'ga pi. In 1972, while she was attending a native American meeting in Escondido, California, she and her friend Julia Kills-in-the-Water cooked more than 400 fry breads for the assembled guests.

Also, as the cook at the Senior Citizen's Center in St. Francis which serves a traditional Sioux meal five days a week during the summer for residents and tourists, she has had more than a little practice. When she and Julia traveled to Maine to visit, the Mohawks fixed a traditional fish chowder for her and Julia. In return the two Sioux women cooked fry bread for the Mohawks. Elizabeth has raised seven children of her own and four other children whose father had died. Since wigli un ka 'ga pi is a favorite food of Sioux children, Elizabeth has cooked fry bread innumerable times within her own home. She sometimes makes a yeast fry bread instead of the baking powder variety, but the latter is more traditional.

Elizabeth is the granddaughter of John Colombe, a highly respected man who was sometimes asked to go to Washington D.C. on behalf of his people during his younger days. On one such occasion when the people had gathered at John Colombe's home to discuss his impending trip to Washington, Elizabeth's mother retired to an upstairs bedroom to give birth to Elizabeth.

An older friend of her grandfather's Paul Dorian, requested the honor of naming the child if it was a girl. When Elizabeth's lusty first cries were heard, the old gentleman gave her the name of Ho na ron pi win, "Voices Heard Woman". Elizabeth's voice is still being heard, and so are the other voices which acclaim her as an outstanding cook of traditonal Sioux foods.



Breaking up dried choke cherry patties for wojapi.

Wigliun ka ga pi puffs up as it fries.

Elizabeth stirs the thickening into the wojapi.