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Bent's Old Fort

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Bent's Old Fort Guards Old West

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GREAT ESCAPES / Diane Zuckerman

BRIGHTLY jacketed youngsters, captivated by so many intriguing objects to explore, dart about excitedly discovering what life was like in the Old West. They finger a full-sleeved shirt and narrow-legged long johns hanging on a mountain man's makeshift clothesline and sniff in the aromatic scent of pine boards stacked in a 19th-century carpenter's shop. They scramble into circular towers, called bastions, to stare like sentries upon fields where troops marched toward Santa Fe during the war with Mexico in 1846.



Special to The Denver Post / Diane Zuckerman

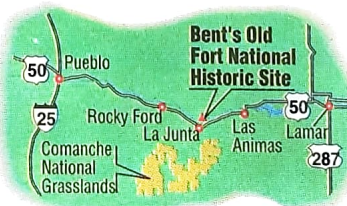
Reconstructed in 1976, the fort closely resembles the original structure built in 1833.

Bent's Old Fort guards Old West

decades before its importance waned due to declining trade, devastating cholera epidemics and growing Indian hostilities. The original fort was abandoned in 1849 and burned. Over time, the remaining traces crumbled and disappeared.

Title to the fort eventually passed to the federal government. After years of archaeological research and historic sleuthing, Bent's Old Fort was reconstructed in 1976. It closely resembles the structure that served the trappers who swarmed west for beaver skins and the wagonloads of emigrants seeking a better life.

The two-story fort is built around a central courtyard. There are 20-plus rooms furnished with replicas of furni-



The Denver Post / Bruce Gaut

ture and implements used during the fort's heyday from 1845 to 1846. An adjacent corral holds oxen and a mule, important animals on the Santa Fe Trail.

A huge fur press dominates the central plaza, casting a shadow that reaches toward a sun-bleached deer hide drying on a wooden frame. Nearby stands a small cannon, a copy of the tubes made using metal tubings salvaged from British ships during the War of 1812.

While society in the 19th century West was less status-conscious than its eastern counterpart, even rough-and-tumble locales such as Bent's Old Fort had a hierarchy. The top strata included the clerk, whose single room had a canopy on the bed, a bearskin rug on the floor and a real chess board. By contrast, trappers and hunters made do with rough, dormitory-style digs and a crude checkerboard, drawn on a table top and sporting hand-colored playing pieces.

Lower on the scale were laborers who slept in the cramped rooms where they worked, alongside brushes and buckets of sand. The cook rated better facilities, judging from the airy kitchen filled with ket-

On the map

Bent's Old Fort is about 200 miles southeast of Denver. Take Interstate 25 to Pueblo and exit at U.S. 50 east. Follow U.S. 50 to La Junta and take Colorado 109 north about one-half mile. Turn right on Colorado 194 and go east for 8 miles.

Bent's Old Fort is open 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Memorial Day through Labor Day, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. the rest of the year. It is closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's. Admission is \$2 per person; free for those under 17 years of age. For more information, call 1-719-384-2596.

tles, crockery and overhead cascades of dried chiles.

The trade room bursts with eye-catching goods. Heaps of stringed beads hang above a counter holding a rough-haired buffalo hide. The rest of the stock ranges from fancy buttons to a thick beaver pelt, its soft, durable fur making it clear why beaver hats became so fashionable. If the trade room's tempting array triggers a yearning for souvenirs, a nearby shop sells everything from guidebooks to felt "beaver" hats.

Costumed interpretive guides are on hand to share historical lore and demonstrate equipment such as the blacksmith shop's glowing furnace and clanging tools. And life wasn't all hard work at the fort -

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Look out the separate billiard room, with its pool table and small primitive bar.

One of the most attractive rooms is the one used by pioneer emigrant Susan Shelby Magoffin, who stayed here in July and August 1846.

Bent's Old Fort can be a soothing respite.
Her quarters - the best accommodations at the fort - are brightened by two small windows that let in slivers of light. Even with the afternoon sun blazing outside, the room remains cool and peaceful. It must have seemed an oasis in the wilderness for Magoffin, who stayed at the fort while recovering from a miscarriage she had suffered just days after her 19th birth-



The two-story fort is built around a central courtyard: rooms are filled with replicas of furniture used in the 1800s.

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day. Bent's Old Fort, with its cottonwood-shaded trail leading to the banks of the peaceful Arkansas River, still can be a

soothing respite from a high-tech, tightly paced world. □

Dianne Zuckerman is a freelance writer who lives in Boulder. Find a

full set of Great Escapes features on The Denver Post Online, <http://www.denverpost.com>. Click the "Summertime" link on the homepage.