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Past, Present Meet at Bent's Old Fort

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Past, present meet at Bent's Old Fort

News 9-27-72 P.3T
By Lee Vermillion

LA JUNTA — "Indians are coming!" Petticoats flying, a young girl runs through the dusty plaza of Bent's Old Fort, carrying her news to a couple of grizzled fur trappers seated on a rough-hewn bench against an adobe wall. The men nod knowingly, hardly pausing in their conversation. Nearby, a half-dozen Mexican women continue to go about their daily tasks, silently sweeping and mending clothing.

Until now, it's been another typical afternoon at this frontier stronghold near the Arkansas River in southeastern Colorado.

With news of approaching visitors, however, a buzz quickly spreads through the compound. We join a group of onlookers gathering in the central plaza to watch two Arapaho warriors enter through the fort's heavy front gates, their wives following a few steps behind. The Indians' dark hair is braided and adorned with eagle feathers, and both men wear deerskin leggings and painted faces.

Most of us are speechless at the sight of these unexpected visitors, who seat themselves on blankets, face-to-face with the fort's interpreter. A Mexican woman immediately is dispatched to fetch apples for the guests.

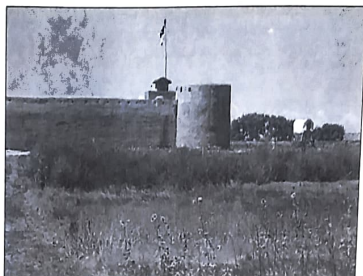
Through rudimentary sign language translated by the fort's store manager, John Luzader, we learn that the Arapaho men, who are named Silent Eagle and Looks Away, have come to trade for guns.

An elaborate trading ritual unfolds as Luzader brings out a rifle, indicating he will swap it for 10 horses. No, the Indians counter, eight horses. The Mexican woman reappears, this time with tin cups filled with thick, sweet coffee that she serves the men. Talk continues as the Arapaho explain they need guns to fight their enemies, the Pawnee.

"Tell them that the Cheyenne and Arapaho are brothers of the white trader," Luzader commands the interpreter, his voice booming across the plaza. "Tell them that their warriors are brave."

Finally, after more negotiating, the Indians agree to trade eight horses (worth \$10-\$20 each) for a rifle (a \$6 value) and some coffee. The exchange is not as one-sided as it seems, as the Arapaho are rich in horses and consider the white man's rifles extremely valuable.

Silent Eagle brings out a hand-carved pipe, which he lights and passes to each of the men. The trade is completed. Ever the salesman, Luzader agrees to take the Ara-



Top: Men in period costume represent traders during re-enactments of historic scenes at Bent's Old Fort.

Left: The fort, a National Historic Site, is a detailed reproduction of the headquarters of a trade empire that flourished from 1833 to 1849.

Photos by Randy Brown
Special to the News

paho on a tour of the fort as the crowd disperses.

At Bent's Old Fort near La Junta, past and present meet head-on within the outpost's thick adobe walls. The trade scene we have just witnessed is conducted with great attention to historical accuracy, so that with only the slightest bit of imagination, visitors can transport themselves back to the 1840s.

It was a fleeting time in America's history when Indians were considered friendly, willing trade partners — and the fort's owners ran their thriving business like feudal landlords.

Bent's Old Fort, a National Historic Site, is a detailed reproduction of the headquarters of a vast trade empire that flourished from 1833 to 1849. The fort's strategic location along the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail made it the most important port of call between Missouri and New Mexico territory.

Three shrewd entrepreneurs, Charles Bent, William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, founded Bent, St. Vrain & Company in 1831 as a fur trading enterprise. Using Mexican labor to construct their "Castle on the Plains," the partners developed a commercial empire that relied upon friendly relations with the various Indian tribes that inhabited the region, as well as the Mexicans, who controlled the territory just south of the Arkansas River.

During the outpost's 16-year existence, many Southern Cheyenne, Arapaho, Ute, Northern Apache, Kiowa and Comanche came to barter buffalo robes and horses for rifles, blankets and beads. The Mexican nationals traded precious metals for desirable manufactured goods. The fort also catered to mountain men who came to swap furs for equipment and supplies, and served as a quasi-hotel for travelers, offering meals and lodging for \$1 per night.

Of the numerous Indian tribes that traded with the company, the Southern Cheyenne were the most important. William Bent married into the tribe, undoubtedly to strengthen his business

connections. However, he became an influential friend of the Indians (whom he still referred to as "savages"), encouraging peaceful coexistence among the region's multi-cultured inhabitants.

Nowadays, Bent's Old Fort commemorates its landmark status in American history with a series of re-enactments conducted throughout the year. On Saturday, Oct. 10, and Sunday, Oct. 11, Plains Indian culture will be celebrated by the fort's volunteer interpreters, some of whom are Native Americans. Using crafts and traditional clothing to realistically portray Indian life during the 1840s, participants will create an authentic tepee village near the fort.

More special activities scheduled during the weekend include authentic Indian trade scenes, music by Cheyenne singer Moses Starr and lectures by two members of the Cheyenne tribe, Rollin Haag and John Sipes. Haag is a descendant of the famous Cheyenne chief Black Kettle, whose people were massacred at Sand Creek in 1864.

Other highlights at the fort include a working blacksmith forge, a company store filled with trade goods and a formal dining room — complete with linen tablecloth and china — where the Bents entertained important visitors. Guided tours, led by interpreters in period costumes, are offered every hour and provide an excellent overview of the frontier outpost's colorful past.

Lee Vermillion is a Denver freelance writer.

IF YOU GO

Bent's Old Fort is 8 miles east of La Junta and 15 miles west of Las Animas on Colorado 194 (approximately 185 miles southeast of Denver). The fort is open year-round; admission is \$1 for adults; seniors and children are admitted free. For more information, call (719) 384-2596. Lodging, restaurants and services are available in La Junta and Las Animas.