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Bent's Old Fort

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Report from Bent's Old Fort

La Junta Tribune Democrat

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BENTS OLD FORT

Forts.
Bent's fort



A series by William Featherstone, superintendent

ACTIVITIES AT THE FORT

Trading, of course, was the principal activity at Bent's Fort. When, by 1849, conditions no longer favored this business, the Fort was abandoned. Park Historian Dwight Stinson has described trading activities here as "three-cornered."

"Trade goods of American manufacture," he writes, "were hauled along the Santa Fe Trail from Missouri. A portion of the goods was deposited at the Fort, and the remainder continued down the Trail into Mexican Territory where it was disposed of at the mercantile outlets operated by St. Vrain and Charles Bent in Taos and Santa Fe. This same method operated in reverse, with goods of Mexican and Navajo origin being allocated to the Fort or carried on to Missouri. The third corner consisted of the Indian tribes who either traded their buffalo robes for goods at the Fort or were reached by traders traveling to the Indian camps. The robes were transported to the company's eastern outlets. The Fort also catered to independent Mountain Men who bartered beaver pelts and other furs for the equipment and supplies needed to maintain themselves."

Bent's Fort, for those venturesome enough to come out this far west, was an outpost of civilization and a natural stopping place for travelers. Stinson says that "among those known to have visited during the Bent period were Matthew Field (New Orleans journalist), Thomas J. Farnham (English traveler), Frederick A. Wislizenus (German-American naturalist), Marcus Whitman (missionary), Francis Parkman (author-historian) and George F. Ruxton (English author). Many figures prominent in the history of the West were associated with the Fort, the most famous of all being Kit Carson, who was employed by the firm intermittently."

"From our viewpoint," Stinson says, "the most significant aspect of the history of Bent's Fort was the role the structure played in the territorial expansion of the United States. Relations between the Company and the U.S. Army entered into a more than casual phase in the summer of 1843 when a contract was consummated calling for the storage of Army provisions at the post. The following year, John C. Fremont's Second Expedition disbanded at the Fort, having completed its 'Great Reconnaissance of 1843-1844'." In 1845 the Army sent out three expeditions ostensibly to map the Southwest and gather scientific information, but in many respects, simply to compile intelligence to be used in the event of war with Mexico. Each of the three paused for supplies at Bent's Fort.

"In the spring of 1846, the long-expected war with Mexico broke out. At Fort Leavenworth, Col. Kearny was given command of a force designated as the "Army of the West," and charged with the invasion of New Mexico. The colonel planned to march his column to Bent's Fort and use that as a base for an invasion of Mexican territory. Kearny arrived in late July and remained in and near the Fort for several days. Before moving on, he had, in effect, converted the Fort into a depot and assigned an Army Quartermaster officer to see that stores were properly stockpiled and forwarded as needed. The Fort continued to serve in this capacity until late 1847."