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Bent's Old Fort

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Rangers Add Life to Story of the Past

Rocky Mountain News

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At Bent's Old Fort, history is much more than a plaque

Rangers 'add life' to story of the past

By Dean Krakeel
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Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

BENT'S OLD FORT — Every morning, Janet Runions commutes 14 miles to work and travels 150 years back in time.

Runions, 32, is a seasonal ranger in the living history program at Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, located along Colorado 194 between Las Animas and La Junta in southeast Colorado.

Colorado Journal

"What I like about working at the fort is that you leave all your troubles ahead of you because you're going behind," Runions said.

Stretching out her moccasin-clad feet and drawing a black shawl tighter around her shoulders, Runions warmed herself beside an adobe fireplace in one of the fort's reconstructed trading rooms as she spoke. Candlelight played across the mud walls. Outside, chickens strutted across the courtyard.

"When you do living history you're yourself living in another time," Runions said. "We add life to the story of this old fort, to these rooms."
Dressed in early 19th-century attire, practicing pioneer crafts, Runions and a half-dozen other



Seasonal ranger Janet Runions, dressed in the style of the early 1800s, plays an Irish tin whistle for visitors to Bent's Old Fort.

Dean Krakeel/Rocky Mountain News

National Park Service employees keep the past alive.

Constructed as a fur trading center by Charles and William Bent and Certan St. Vrain in 1833-34, Bent's Fort was one of the first European settlements in Colorado.

The fort's small cannons were trained on both the Arkansas River and the Santa Fe trail. A rich mix of Colorado's cultural heri-

tage passed through its gates to find shelter behind its 3-foot-thick adobe walls.

"There were Germans, French, English, Spanish, Native Americans, traders, mountain men and free slaves, all living together in this lone structure," said the fort's chief ranger, Alexandra Aldred. "It was just a bab-

ble of different languages trying to understand each other so

that they could work together."

Following the decline of the fur trade, the death of Charles Bent and the dissolution of their partnership with St. Vrain, William Bent destroyed the fort in 1849.

"This site was set aside to commemorate the expansion of the fur trade in the West," said assistant chief ranger Steve Thede. "A plaque would do that. What's been done instead is that the fort has been reconstructed. Here you really can take a person from the 20th century to the 19th century and make that person really feel what it must have been like."

