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Bent's Old Fort

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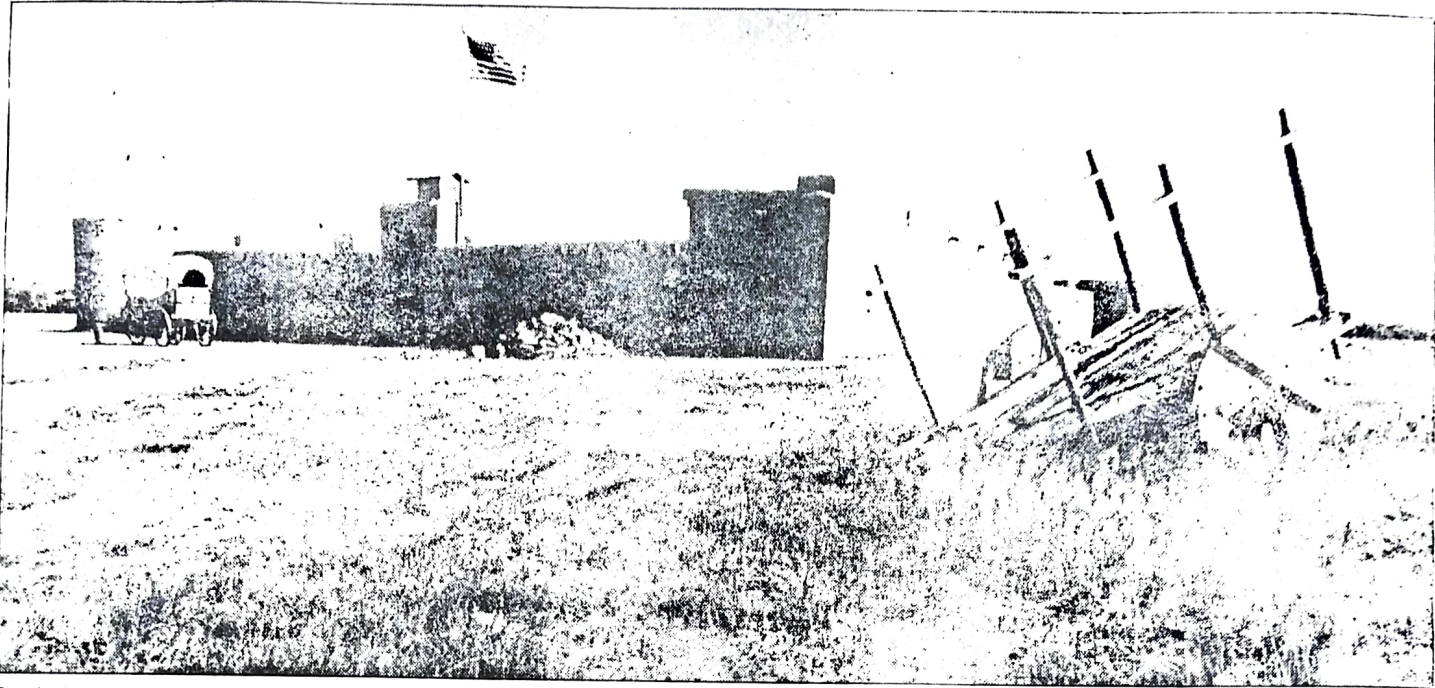
Bent's Fort is Where Colorado Began

Rocky Mountain News

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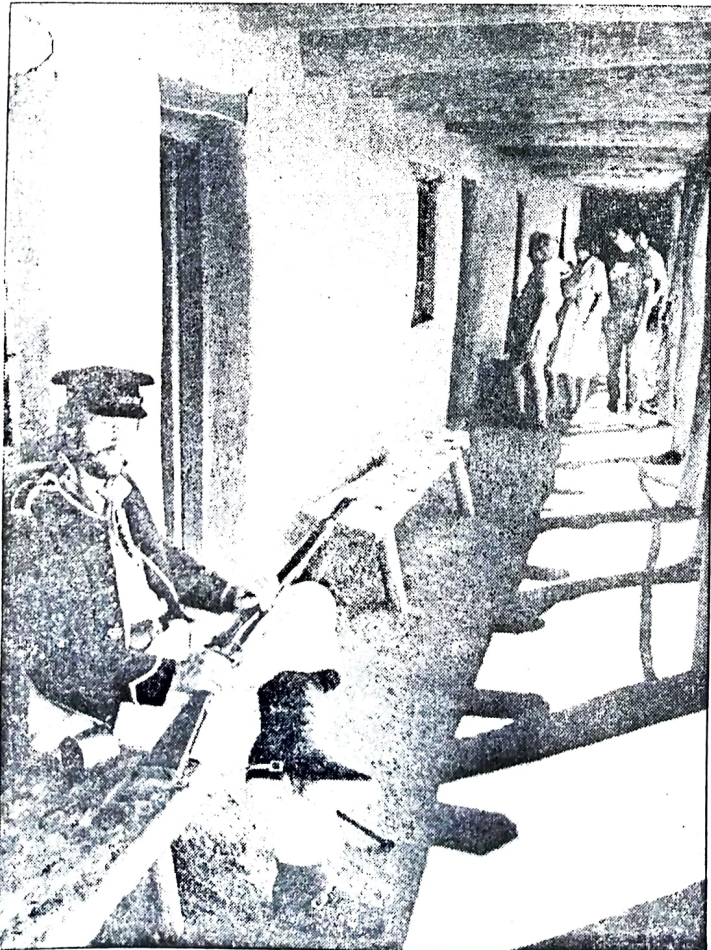
For IS. Bent's Fort

State/Region



Bent's Old Fort near La Junta flourished from 1831 to 1849 as a stopping off point for settlers, soldiers and adventurers traveling the Sante Fe Trail.

Bent's Fort is where Colorado began



Story by **JOE GARNER**
Photography by **FRANK KIMMEL**

LA JUNTA — When shadows lengthen late on a summer afternoon, setting the imagination in motion, a wagon train 50 days out of Independence, Mo., swirls up dust as it lumbers off the sand hills toward the Arkansas River.

The destination of the wagon train 150 years ago was Bent's Fort, now reconstructed as Bent's Old Fort, one of 10 Colorado sites administered by the National Park Service.

The outpost was the Denver of its day, the commercial, industrial and transportation hub for the Rocky Mountain West.

"Think of this as the only truckstop between Independence and Santa Fe," said Bill Gwaltney, the chief ranger. "If you had a gun to be fixed or a wagon to be repaired, this was where you found the blacksmith to do it."

"When you had traveled hundreds of miles from Missouri, and this was the only structure you saw and people were eating off tables with white cloths, you thought it was a big deal."

Today, most tourists hurry past Bent's Old Fort, 175 miles southeast of Denver, on their way to Colorado's other, better-publicized parks, forests and attractions. Some 43,000 people visited Bent's Old Fort last year compared with 2.5 million who visited Rocky Mountain National Park, the state's most popular draw.

"We didn't know about (the fort) until we stopped at a gas station," said Emma Huebbers, a retiree from Crystal River, Fla. "When we were told it wasn't too far away, we came to see it. We're trying to see all we can while we're in Colorado."

Colorado began at Bent's Fort. It was built in the 1830s by brothers Charles and William Bent, and their business partner, Ceran St. Vrain. Fur traders from St. Louis, they were intent on the lavish profits they gave themselves on beaver pelts

Sam Walker, left, a seasonal ranger from Fort Laramie, Wyo., appears in authentic dragoon garb of the mid-1800s. Walker is one of several costumed staff members who greet visitors to Bent's Fort. Though not a military installation, Bent's was a way station and trading post for the Army. Above, pine marten pelts harken to the days when trappers frequented the fort.

bought low from the Indians and sold high to make hats for Eastern and European dandies.

The trading post reached its peak of influence in 1846, the year represented in displays and re-enactments designed to bring the fort to life.

In 1846, as the nation waged war with Mexico, the fort, built as a trading post not a military installation, was designated as an advance base for an invasion of New Mexico territory. The steady traffic of soldiers, settlers and adventurers across the Plains, fouling the water holes and frightening the bison, destroyed the spirit of peace and confidence that William Bent had established among the hostile Indian tribes so his company could trade with them.

CAUGHT BETWEEN the Indian tribes and encroaching whites, William Bent offered the outpost to the federal government for \$16,000. The government turned him down.

After an outbreak of cholera on the frontier in 1849, William Bent loaded his Indian wife, family and employees in a wagon and headed east to the Big Timbers area, near present-day Lamar. He left the fort smoldering, perhaps torched by his own hand or by Indians.

The hulk of the fort was a stagecoach stop from 1861 to 1881, but the rise of the railroad put stage lines out of business.

As the 19th century evolved into the 20th, the fort slowly disappeared as settlers carried away bricks. Wind, rain and snow returned the adobe walls to the earth from which they had come.

"It hadn't even been excavated the first time I was there," said Jess Carson, 73, a La Junta resident whose grandfather was the legendary frontier scout Kit Carson. "There was just a plaque that the DAR put up. . . . I like to see the old things kept up, so I was glad when it was rebuilt."

But Bent's Old Fort is no Disney World version of early Colorado history.

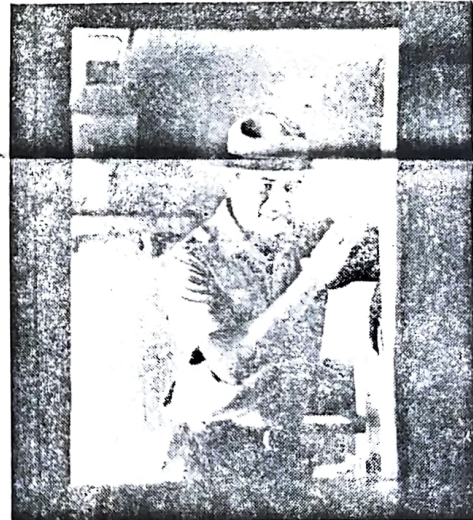
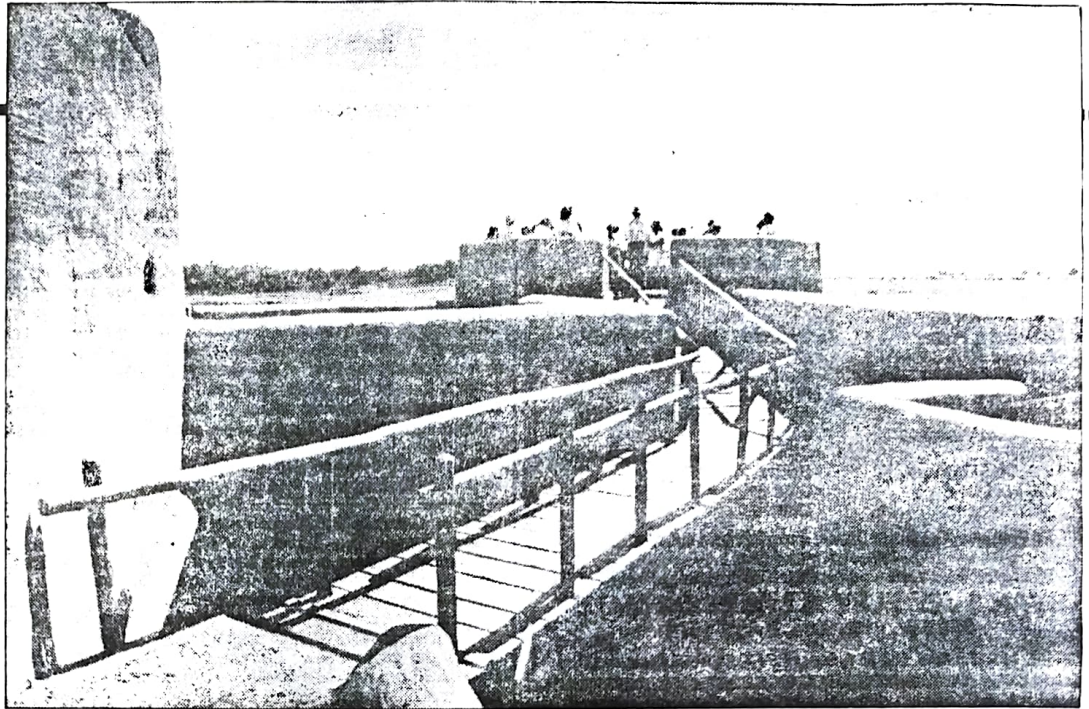
Reconstructed for \$1.2 million on the site of the original fort, the replica was dedicated in 1976, furnished as life was lived on the frontier 150 years ago. New this season is an Indian Trade Room, stocked with such items as copper pots, wooden bowls, skinning knives and tack for sale to visitors as similar goods were traded to Indians in the 19th century.

"What we're doing is not entertaining the public, but trying to educate them in a way that will be enjoyable," said Sam Walker, a graduate student at the University of Wyoming who portrays a dragoon, the soldiers who preceded the cavalry. "We try to stay away from things that are exotic, like the Gunfight at the OK Corral. We try to talk about the human aspirations that draw common threads from today and 150 years ago."

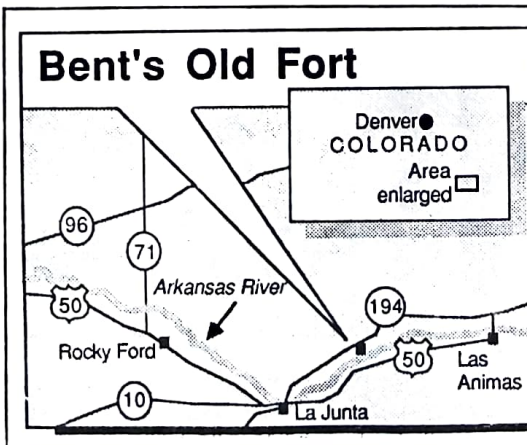
LOCATED EIGHT miles east of La Junta on Colorado 194, the rebuilt adobe fort rises up from the Arkansas River Valley under cornflower blue skies and cauliflower clouds, creating the sense that maybe this was how the West looked before it was tamed by electric lines, concrete highways and satellite dishes.

The fort is a quarter-mile walk from a parking lot, past a marsh where red-winged blackbirds, killdeer, magpies and meadowlarks trill a melody of open spaces, elbow room and fresh starts in the West.

"We say you walk back in time when you leave the parking lot to come visit us," said Gwaltney, the chief ranger. "The most important thing is that we want people to go away with a feeling that we have drawn them into the 19th century, whether they've helped a dragoon saddle a horse or a pioneer woman prepare a meal. We want them to understand that life then was different only in degree."



A ranger, top, lectures visitors atop one of two defensive bastions at Bent's Old Fort. The fort was never attacked. Above, seasonal ranger Jesus Moreno answers questions at the fort's main entrance. At left, Art Massey, a volunteer from La Junta, staffs the Indian Trade Room, a new feature this year.



If you go to Bent's Old Fort this summer, allow almost four hours travel from the Denver area. The most direct route is Interstate 25 south to Pueblo and U.S. 50 east to La Junta. Signs mark the way to the fort, 8 miles east of La Junta on Colorado 194.

The park is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Except for most federal holidays, it is open from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. the rest of the year.

Admission is \$3 per vehicle.

Since there are no food and beverage concessions at the fort, bring cool drinks and snacks.

Also, prepare yourself for the intensity of the sun.

Special events scheduled this year include: Old-time Fourth of July; Dragoon encampment, July 24-26; Bent's descendants reunion and pow-wow, Aug. 7-9; Bent's Old Fort fur trade encampment, Labor Day weekend; Diez y Seis de Septiembre (commemoration of Mexico's throwing off Spanish rule), Sept. 16; Winter Quarters (teachers, writers and historic re-enactment groups spend four days at the fort) Oct. 15-18; An 1846 Christmas, Dec. 11-12 and 18-19.