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Bent's Old Fort

Colorado National Parks

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### Pioneers Assemble at Bent's Fort

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# kinners 1985 days West looks down s, fur hats



Mountain men test their accuracy in an tomahawk-throwing contest.

## INSIDE

■ Bent's Old Fort is known as the "citadel on the Santa Fe Trail." Page 10-B.

traders, history buffs and tourists, the 1830s on the Southwest frontier — in the heyday of legendary mountain men trappers and traders — was where they wanted to be. And this recreated "rendezvous," one of the largest of many staged during summer months by "buckskinner" clubs in the Rocky Mountain region, was the next best thing to stepping into a time machine.

Historical accounts of actual 1830s rendezvous in Colorado, Wyoming and elsewhere — in towns such as Bernard DeVoto's "Across the Wide Missouri" — describe wild weeks of raucous trading, fall-down drinking, gambling and drunken whoring.

The early September gathering, regulated by the U.S. National Park Service, which operates this national historic site, was a cleaned-up act with muzzle-loaded rifle shooting and tomahawk-throwing contests — all eminently authentic. Though suitable as family fare, the conclave still succeeded in retaining the flavor of the short-lived mountain man chapter in the American frontier, the zenith

of which ran only from 1820 to 1840.

For some of the participants, the frontier 1830s may have been the best of times.

"That was the last time a man could go out on his own with only

beaver traps and a black-powder rifle and minimize the impact of the Industrial Revolution," said Dan Muldoon, whose troop mustache and flowing red hair give him an air of young Buffalo Bill Cody portraits. At 34, Muldoon is more than a weekend "buckskinner." In real life, he's an exhibit technician for the Lawton (Oklahoma) Museum of the Great Plains, where he "interprets" a fur trader at the museum's recreated Red River trading post.

"This isn't just a get-together so people can camp out in leather pants," added Muldoon, who was a Park Service employee here when the service supervised the first interpretative rendezvous four years ago with 27 participants.

This year, there were well over 300, excluding visitors.

"Gatherings like this make places like Bent's Old Fort (see related story on page 10-B) come alive," Muldoon said.

"Otherwise, all you have is a building. This helps make the past as real as the present — and there's a lot of interest in re-



Ott Ainslie plays the banjo and Dan Muldoon plays bone spoons.

of the items around them are for sale.



# 'Pioneers' assemble at Bent's Fort

**BENT'S** from Page 1-B *9/28/80*

creations and interpretations of this period of American history."

Muldoon mentioned with lament that "Professor (Frederic Jackson) Turner said the frontier was dead by 1890." With a sense of loss, he mused on Thomas Jefferson's dictum: "that government is best which governs the least . . . . He then brightened and said, "read in Jay Anderson's 'Time Machines,' published by the American Association of State and Local History, that historical re-enactment — like this — could well become a big participatory sport across the country."

On a blanket behind him were frontier artifacts — baskets, powder horns, beaded leather and a handmade dress of fringed buckskin. All for sale, starting at just a few dollars on up to \$1,100 for the handsome dress.

These wares — and those offered by other participant traders — had to be at least reasonable facsimiles of actual pre-1840s frontier articles to conform with fort superintendent Jerry Phillips' guidelines for "a high level of authenticity. Which means no tourist junk. And no plastic."

In the tent village, western artist Deborah Hohn — traveling with Muldoon — said, "for me, maybe the appeal of these things comes down to sitting around a fire, listening to a fiddler playing. There's endless variety, it never gets old and you meet great people. We do lots of trading, too. We arrived here with two saddles, and I think we'll leave with about eight."

Outside the fort's wall, two "mountain men" in fringed buckskin and homespun shirts were demonstrating the difference in operating flintlock and percussion muzzle-loading rifles, the latter becoming more popular on the frontier by 1840.

To a crowd of picture-snapping onlookers, a "mountain man" explained how a smooth-bore rifle, though it sacrificed distance and accuracy, was better for up-close hunting. The last flintlocks, he said, were sold in America in the 1930s.

In tomahawk-throwing competition near the Arkansas River's banks, Emory Trask — age 70 — in a leather hat and bone-button shirt, split an aspen leaf on a tree-stump target.

and Pueblo steel mill worker v today raises horses east of Pueb said he has actual mountain m (one being Eldridge Trask, in 1830s) in his family tree that cludes New England whalers a dates to 1636 in Massachuset Having gotten into buckskinning an outgrowth of hunting, Tra was last year named "outstandin mountain man" at a rendezvous a tended by 5,000 buckskinners ne here. He was awarded a workin flintlock rifle replica.

"You meet people from all ove the country and these get-togeth ers can give you a sense of close ness and belonging that may be missing from lots of lives," said Jenny Dorr, who's a historic inter preter at an 1868 historic site in Colorado Springs. She said she has read more than 300 history books — many about women in the West.

"Some of the people here fear technology," she noted. "But they know that if the technology fails — and it sometimes does — they have the skills to survive."

Ray Dorr, her husband in a 36-year marriage, is a Colorado Springs general contractor and Western history buff. "I got tired of hunting with modern equipment and picked up a muzzle-loading rifle," he said. "Next thing I knew, I was involved with a buckskinner club. Some buckskinners are former Boy Scouts, and some are former motorcyclers. For me, this is a lot more than simply a form of camping and an escape from the modern world. You make good friends and look forward to seeing them every year. You meet doctors, lawyers and blue-collar workers. But the professionals are usually the dustiest and dirtiest."

Along with local buckskin clubs in Denver, Lamar, La Junta, Pueblo and Colorado Springs, Dorr explained, the American Mountain Man Association, headquartered at Fort Bridger in Wyoming (after legendary mountain man Jim Bridger), has more than 1,000 members. They're spread across the United States and in several foreign countries as distant as Australia and Finland.

Chief Park Ranger Nancy Jane Cushing doesn't think buckskinning's primary appeal is escapism. "People have to live in 1985 whether they accept it or not," she said. "But for people who have 8-to-5 jobs and live in cities, there's a fascination in being able to step back in time, to relive history and to touch base with a simpler form of life."

For some, buskskinning already has become too popular.

"I don't go to the rendezvous at Fort Bridger (over the Labor Day weekend) anymore," groused Kansas buckskin trader Rick Bauman.

"It's gotten too big and out of hand. It's like going to a state fair."