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Bent's Old Fort

Colorado National Parks

N/A

Denver Post

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Kit Carson's Indian wife had died leaving him with a young daughter, Adeline. He always made arrangements for her care when he was away from the fort, which was often.

Old Juan, a one-eyed Mexican vaquero, and his helpers guarded the animals picketed outside the fort. Many mules and horses arrived in such poor shape they required a long pasture rest to recover. Juan was expert in breaking them.

Baptiste Charbonneau was the fort's super teamster. He handled 10 to 12 mules or several pairs of oxen with ease. Baptiste was born on the Lewis and Clark expedition, son of Sacajawea, famous Bird Woman guide, and Touissant Charbonneau.

Ed, the French tailor, using a three-sided needle and sinew thread, made the long-lasting buckskin shirts and leggings and repaired saddles.

Bent's Old Fort was never the place to go for a quiet, peaceful two-week vacation. Those who worked there were so occupied during the day and so exhausted at night the noise and clatter didn't bother them. But visitors heard a veritable international babel in the plaza—French, German, Mexican, Indian, English. Mules brayed. Dogs barked. The blacksmith's hammer rang out from dawn to dusk as did the incessant pounding from the wagoner's repair work. Men argued, gambled, swore. Women laughed. Children cried. Every night Old Juan drove his animals thundering and snorting into the corral.

When a wagon train arrived it was the time for a celebration. The fort was a social center. Sometimes the Indians would come to the fort to share their fun with dancing and jubilation.

When there was an especially boisterous crowd in the plaza or outside the walls, William set armed patrols on the parapets. He had to settle many a dispute but if someone got too rough or in a shooting mood he was sent packing; if an employe, he was fired. Vigilance paid off and the fort was never attacked. Sometimes the Indians held some white person captive and William had to barter for his freedom.

As business prospered, Charles Bent and St. Vrain spent more time at the Taos-Santa Fe end and William spent much of his time trying to promote peace between the Indians because their continual fighting was bad for business. The younger brothers, Robert and George, then did more of the management.

As buffalo and beaver grew scarce, trade declined. The westward movement of people disrupted the Indian way of life and the army took an increasingly active part in the country's development. By the late 1840s employes were drifting away.

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By 1849, last year of the fort's operation, William had lost his three brothers: Robert and George both buried outside the fort, Charles in Taos where he was killed soon after becoming governor of New Mexico. St. Vrain had gone back east and William had buried Owl Woman, his wife. He offered to sell the fort to the U.S. government, but the deal did not work out so in a mood of impetuous decisiveness so characteristic of him, he decided it was time to move on. He ordered goods loaded into the wagons except some gunpowder, attached long fuses to the powder and when all was clear ignited the fuses setting off a fire in the fort. It was more a gesture of defiance and despair than severe demolition, but signs of charred remains verify the deed.

William and his family went downriver to Big Timbers where Yellow Wolf had suggested they build the fort two decades earlier. Here, in time, he built Bent's New Fort, of stone and similar to the first one, and operated it several years. He died in 1869 at age 60 and is buried in the Las Animas cemetery.

From 1861 to 1881 the old fort was occupied by Barlow-Sanderson Overland Mail and Express Company as a home station and repair shop. Then wind and weather took its toll. Homesteaders borrowed bricks from the crumbling walls for their houses. The Great Pueblo Flood of 1921 swept over the remains.

But now the old fort will rise from its ruins. The Stars and Stripes will fly over its entrance tower. Visitors in 1976 will hear the clang of the blacksmith's hammer, smell meat cooking on the great hearth, watch the tailor sewing buckskin garments and hear the bell summoning all hands to meals.