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Bent's Old Fort

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Soldiers, traders, Cholera spell ruin for Old Bent's Fort

Denver Post

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Soldiers, traders, cholera spell

By J. Sebastian Sinisi

Denver Post Staff Writer

LA JUNTA — Called a "citadel on the Santa Fe Trail," Bent's Old Fort is the most important stop along that trail between its origin at Independence, Mo., and its end at Santa Fe, N.M. It also played a role in developing the frontier that outlived the "mountain men" era with which it's identified.

The old fort was built in 1833 by brothers Charles and William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, three frontier

entrepreneurs from St. Louis who wore the no-nonsense looks of mercantile missionaries.

At the Cimarron Cutoff in Kansas, the trail forked to a direct route toward Santa Fe via a "mountain branch" along the Arkansas River and south over Raton Pass. While the "direct" route included a day journey across waterless desert lands, the mountain route — although 150 miles longer — was safer and less arid.

The Arkansas River was the

boundary between American and Mexican territory at the time, and the fort was as close as you could get to Mexico and still be in the United States, explained park superintendent Jerry Phillips. "A lot of the trade that took place at the fort was not romantic stuff," he added, rather, "bolts of cloth, ready-made clothes, ironware and metal utensils. For mountain men trading in hides and furs, spring and fall were the logical times for a rendezvous, since that was when

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the best trade goods arrived from St. Louis."

When the price of beaver pelts fell to 60 cents a pound in 1836, Phillips said, trade shifted to buffalo hides.

The fort fell victim to its own success. As strained relations with Mexico worsened into war in 1846, the federal government designated the adobe trading post as advance staging base for Stephen Kearney's invasion of New Mexico. A constant flow of soldiers, adventurers

and gold-seekers brought cattle that overgrazed surrounding lands. They also introduced cholera that decimated neighboring Indians and earned ill will for the Bents, who theretofore had been on good terms with them.

With the mountain-men fur trade declining because of overtrapping beaver and the new preference for silk rather than beaver in hatmaking, trade at the fort already had slumped before the arrival of U.S. troops. The government never paid

the Bents for use of the fort.

An 1849 cholera epidemic was a final blow and the Bents abandoned the fort. Whether they or Indians burned it remains unclear. Either way, it remained "a smoldering monument to Manifest Destiny" (according to the U.S. Park Service) until more than 10 years of digging, research into its foundations and rebuilding resulted in a restored Bent's Old Fort opening as a National Historic Site on July 4, 1976.