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Bent's Old Fort

Colorado National Parks

Across the Plains: Incorrect Maps - Prairie Architecture and Adobe Houses

New York Times

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ACROSS THE PLAINS.

Incorrect Maps--Prairie Architecture--
Adobe Houses--Indian and Mexican
Farming.

Correspondence of the New-York Times.

CAMP ENGINEER CORPS, UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD, }
E. D., NEW FORT LYON, Colorado Territory, }
Saturday, July 20, 1867. }

There seems to be much confusion on the maps, in the names and location of the different forts on the Arkansas River, and although to some it may be a matter of indifference, yet to others a correct idea may prove of great importance. Old Fort Lyon, formerly called Fort Wise, is situated on the Arkansas River, eighteen miles above the mouth of Sand Creek, and half a mile from Bent's New Fort. This latter fort was built by Col. BENT, the celebrated Indian trader, and used by him for many years as a trading post; it is used now, however, by the Quartermaster's Department of the Army as a storehouse. Fort Wise was located by Gen. SEDGWICK in 1861, and comfortable, commodious and substantial quarters built of the hard sandstone which abounds in the immediate vicinity. The encroachments of the river upon the banks upon which the fort is built, together with the liability to overflow--the entire parade-ground of the fort having this season been under water--rendered it necessary to move the fort to some more suitable spot. A beautiful plateau in a bend of the river, about fifty feet above high-water mark, twenty-five miles above the old fort, was selected. About six weeks ago the work of moving the post began. The Pangating or Purgatoire River, or, as it is called here, the Picketwire, empties into the Arkansas three miles above this point.

On our arrival the troops and most of the officers were quartered in tents. Brevet Brig.-Gen. PENNOSE, commanding post, and Capt. KIMM, the Quartermaster, having their families with them, occupy temporary though quite comfortable stone houses. The plans for this fort, which I had an opportunity to examine, provide for buildings of such a character as, when completed, will make this by far the finest post west of Leavenworth. The buildings will be constructed of a fine-grained and very hard variegated sandstone, and in the quality of building material and style of finish will be unsurpassed. This stone is quarried within a quarter of a mile of the fort. The lumber is obtained from the mountains, one hundred miles distant.

On the Arkansas, about fourteen miles above here, is situated Old Bent's Fort, built by Col. BENT in 1832, formerly a trading post, but now used as a stage station by the Ellsworth and Santa Fé Stage Company. Here the Denver and Puebla stages connect with the stages on this route for the East.

Fort Reynolds is a new fort, recently located on the south side of the Arkansas, at the mouth of the Huerfano. As yet there are no permanent quarters here, but the contracts for building material have already been let.

About twenty miles above Fort Lyon occurs a bed of limestone, from which a very fine quality of lime is made, and which furnishes the lime for building.

Yesterday, in company with Capt. BLAIR, of our party, I rode over to the settlements on the Purgatoire. On this river, below the cañon, which is thirty miles distant, I am told there is a population of about five thousand. These people are engaged in growing corn and wheat and raising stock. They are principally Mexicans, although the majority of the land-owners are Americans, more or less intermarried, however, with the Mexicans. We visited the ranch of Mr. BOGGS, (every house, large or small, is called a ranch.) His house is a low, one-story adobe house, with a flat roof made of earth. The inside wall is plastered with mud, leaving quite an undulating surface, which is afterward whitewashed. The ceiling consists of large logs, running lengthwise with the building, and small sticks laid close together across, to prevent the mud, of which the roof is made, from coming through. This is also whitewashed. The floor is made by pouring mud upon the ground and pounding it as it hardens, making it a hard, clean but not very smooth floor. On this uneven floor, in the parlor, was laid quite a handsome carpet. The walls were ornamented with pictures, and not a few books of standard authors lay on the tables. An adobe house is one built of large bricks, about two feet long, one foot wide and six inches thick, which are dried in the sun and laid up in mud, thus making a solid mud wall. A house of this kind is certainly very cool in summer, and is said to be very warm and dry in winter. These ranches or farm-houses are usually built in the form of a square, with an open court in the centre, the only entrance being through a gateway into the court. Surrounding this court on three sides is a single row of rooms, all opening into the court but not communicating with each other. On the third side are the stables, also opening into the court. In the centre of the court is usually a well. This is the model which all imitate; it is carried out according to the means and wants of the proprietor, varying in style of finish and size.

Across the Purgatory we found the adobe store of Mr. THOMPSON, whose stock of goods would do credit to a Leavenworth establishment.

The lands cultivated are the "bottom lands" of the river, and owing to the long droughts experienced during the Summer season it is necessary to water the fields by artificial means. As the river falls quite rapidly, some eight to ten feet per mile, this is easily accomplished by means of canals or ditches, called *acequias*, constructed around the foot of the bluffs. From this main ditch the water is let out at different points over the fields until they are flooded. The fields are divided by smaller ditches into "lands," one "land" being flooded at a time. It is necessary to irrigate the cornfields in this way twice during one season. The principal crop raised is corn, about forty bushels to the acre being considered a good crop. Wheat, beans and every variety of vegetables are also successfully cultivated. The soil of these river bottoms is very fertile, and is improved from year to year by the system of irrigation.

On Mr. BOGGS' place were the first cultivated fields we had seen since leaving Salina, a distance of over three hundred and seventy-five miles. After traveling this distance over the monotonous prairie, the sight of the fields of rich, healthy corn, which, at home though an everyday sight, look so beautiful, and of which we never grow weary, caused emotions difficult to realize without the actual experience. On my return to the fort, I cut a stock of corn, and carried it back with me to our camp. Our party gathered around, every one anxious to handle it, as if unwilling to believe the evidence of their eyes. When I told them I had just seen a thousand acres of just such plants, some looked incredulous, others plied me with questions till I was tired answering them. When I remarked I had sat down to a sumptuous dinner of fresh meat and vegetables, with nice, sweet butter and milk on the table, they went away disgusted.

Col. BENT's farm is adjoining that of Mr. BOGGS, and here I met Robert BENT, his son, to whom I was introduced, and with whom I dined. He seemed to be a very pleasant gentleman, very quiet, yet intelligent, and with a good education. His features are very decidedly Indian, dark skin, high cheek bone, large mouth, black eyes, straight black hair, squarely built form. He expressed great regret at the actions of his brother CHARLIE, who, as you know, is with the Cheyennes. He said "he is a wild, reckless, wicked boy of twenty, who never would behave himself when in decent society." They have forbidden him to come near their place, and will feel relieved when they hear that he has been killed.

Up to this point there is no timber on the Arkansas, except the cotton-wood which borders the stream on either side. This wood is comparatively useless, being too light for fuel, and too rapid to decay for building material. It is said that it is being used on the Platte Route for railroad cross-ties, after being subjected to a process called "burnetizing," which consists in impregnating the wood with a preparation of zinc, after which, it is said, that it will outlast cedar or locust.

The elevation of the plateau on either side is about

300 feet above the river bed. The average width of the valley is about three miles, through which the river winds, and over which is scattered more or less of these cotton-wood trees. In some places the bluffs which skirt the valley are quite abrupt, the sandstone rock "cropping out," and in others receding with a gradual ascent of about ten miles in length. The river water, usually quite clear, is now very muddy; so muddy that while drinking a glass of it quite a sediment will collect in the tumbler. Still the doctors say it is healthful. We have a very easy and effectual method of clearing this water while in camp by throwing into a bucketful a cactus-leaf, and in half an hour the water will be as clear as spring water. The cactus contains a large quantity of albumen, and acts as an egg does with coffee.

The soil of the cotton lands on the Arkansas near this point is not tillable, because of its being strongly impregnated with alkali, giving to the surface water a taste similar to a strong solution of Epsom salts. During the day the surface of the ground seems covered with a slight snow, but during the night the alkali deliquesces, giving the ground a wet appearance as after a slight shower of rain. Grass grows but sparsely, and is of such a nature that stock will not eat it.

To-day some excitement was caused in the fort, by word which arrived that the cholera had broken out among some colored troops who were on their way to this point, and that the Surgeon and his wife and fifteen soldiers had died. Gen. PENNOSE very promptly dispatched a medical officer to their aid, with orders to quarantine the command ten miles from the fort. Gen. WRIGHT also issued a *pronouncement*, enjoining the greatest care on the part of his corps, and directing all with any of the premonitory symptoms to report at once to Dr. LEWIS, the Surgeon of the corps. But as we start for the mountains on Monday, we will soon be breathing the pure mountain air, out of reach of all contagion, though it seems impossible that air could be more pure than here on the plains.

Since our start nearly two months ago from Salina we have had several quite warm days; yet at no time has the weather seemed uncomfortable. There is always more or less of a breeze during the day, while at night at least one blanket, and sometimes more, is necessary for comfort.

At this point we first came in sight of the Rocky Mountains. From where I sit one hundred miles to the westward I can see the white snow on the summit of Greenhorn, a spur of the Rocky Mountains. It is hard to realize that our chain of 106 feet in length would have to be laid down more than 6,280 times to reach this point by a straight line; our course will necessarily be much longer. When we have reached the mountains we will be but one-third of the distance to Albuquerque, and when at Albuquerque, but one-third of the distance to the Pacific.

We start from here Monday, two divisions of our corps going up to Purgatoire, and, via Raton Nias, to Fort Union; a third division, up the Huerfano, via Sangre de Christo Pass and Santa Fé, all rendezvousing at Albuquerque. I accompany the latter party, and will write you again when we reach the Huerfano, giving you the details of our organization.

DELTA.