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ACROSS THE PLAINS.

Perils of a Journey Over the Plains in Midwinter—Reminiscences of "Bent's Old Fort"—What it Costs to Keep Indians Goodnatured—Adventures of a New-York Bartender—A Ball at Santa Fé.

Special Correspondence of the New-York Times
SANTA FE, N. M., Monday, Feb. 5, 1866.

Journeying across the Plains in midwinter is a cool proceeding; ours was a frozen one. By the most direct route from the "States," and, in fact, the only Santa Fé route, it is a fifteen days' journey. A portion of this travel, too, is through a country so infested by Indians that stations cannot be built and kept.

By the route that we took it is more safe. Leaving Denver with Gen. W. R. BREWSTER, the Vice-President of the Overland Dispatch Company, the first hundred and fifty miles of the distance was made in excellent time, reaching "Bent's Old Fort," on the Upper Arkansas, in forty hours. Here we were forced to wait, keeping Lent involuntarily for five days.

"Bent's Old Fort," as it is now called, was built by Col. ST. VRAIN in 1834, and is known in the East as ST. VRAIN'S "Trading Post." It is an adobe-built arrangement, inclosing nearly half an acre of ground. On two sides the walls are formed of the quarters, which are more like casemates than anything else I can liken them to. The rest of the inclosure is simply an adobe wall, of about ten feet in height and two of thickness.

From this place ST. VRAIN has sent to the States during a single year more than one hundred thousand dressed buffalo robes. Here ST. VRAIN, KIT CARSON and BILL BENT lived a joyous life. The old fort was then well kept and comfortably furnished. Among other things of the past, an antiquated billiard-table was in use, and has since gone into firewood. The jovial trio lacked one person to make up a four-handed game of euchre; so sent to St. Louis and engaged the services of a gentleman, at a handsome salary, to make one of the game. A race-track was kept in fine order near the fort, and the place was the very merriest of all the trading posts on the frontier.

Those halcyon days are past. BENT was left in possession of the fort. ST. VRAIN and CARSON went to Laos, and made homes for themselves. BENT'S first wife, the squaw, mother of his children, died about this time, which seemed to affect him considerably. Just at this time the Government, desiring to purchase the fort for a military post, offered BENT \$50,000 for it. BENT asked \$80,000, which the Government did not see fit to give. Thirty thousand dollars would have been a large price for the place.

BENT soon after this took it into his head to leave the place, so he set fire to it and went—going to the present site of Fort Lyon, where he erected a trading post, which is now used as a commissary depot for the fort.

While at this place he entered into another matrimonial arrangement with a Cheyenne squaw, I think, who was too fond of fire-water to be a very congenial companion. One of her pleasant jokes while "under the influence" was to get herself into some commanding position and take shots with a rifle at her lord, and hardly master. This could not last, so BENT got rid of her, and has since that time rather avoided female society.

Of BENT'S family, two sons are with the Indians and one with him at his ranch on the Purgatory River. (This river is called by the mountaineers the Picket Wire.) A daughter is married and settled in Missouri, but at the present time is "on the Walnut" with the Indians, endeavoring to prevail upon them to live up to their terms of the last treaty, but with doubtful success.

Our stay at Bent's Fort was longer than is usual; but the bad weather, that the coach from the States met on what is known as the Long Route, (over which one team is driven nearly two hundred and fifty miles,) occasioned the delay. The coach came and we started. We were more than three hours crossing the Arkansas, on account of the ice, or as the driver phrased it, three hours, three yoke of oxen, five mules, and — lucky to get across anyhow. Two miles and a half an hour, for two days brought us to the Rattoon Pass, after passing through which we had excellent weather and good roads.

The first place of interest after passing through the mountains is Maxwell's Ranch, a description of this place will serve to give an idea of the style of life that some of these old mountain men settle down to finally.

MAXWELL, as he is always called, is a well-built man, with a good face, in which one can see determination and thorough self-reliance. He has an old Mexican grant, which is as yet unconfirmed, of nearly forty miles square. Of this he cultivates, by means of tenants, some thousands of acres, furnishing the land, stock and materials, and receiving one-half the product. There is, I am told, nearly fifty miles of "sike" or ditch for irrigating purposes on this vast farm.

Herdng is another source of income to Mr. MAXWELL—between twenty-five and thirty thousand sheep are somewhere on the farm, but MAXWELL does not know exactly where. The Indians do, however, and provide themselves liberally with the mutton for food. MAXWELL has also herds of mules and horses. The more choice stock he keeps at the ranch. Two-thousand-dollar Spanish merinos are too expensive to feed Indians with.

There is a tribe of the Indians, too, that look upon MAXWELL as the great man. One would think to see his house that the Indians were the proprietors of it, for they certainly occupy just as much or little as suits their convenience. Last Summer, the Indians took advantage of MAXWELL'S absence, and turned the family out, taking full possession. MAXWELL came back and succeeded after some difficulty in dispersing the crowd. Since that time there has never been more than fifty sleeping in the house at one time. This number is not unusual, however.

To keep these Indians good-natured costs MAXWELL from twelve to fifteen thousand dollars yearly, in goods and whisky. He keeps entirely away from them, as he says that he can manage a sober Indian but not a drunken one. Altogether MAXWELL and his ranch are subjects of interest. With regard to the Indian troubles, MAXWELL, CARSON, ST. VRAIN and other experienced men agree that so long as the "Dog Soldiers" (regenade) Indians are allowed to wander about loosely so long will the troubles exist. The "Dog Soldier" is not affected by the recent treaty, and does not care to be.

The next village we reached was "Rio," an adobe-built hamlet, of two or three hundred inhabitants. Then we reached Fort Union, a military post, under the command of Brevet Brig.-Gen. KIT CARSON. We found this well-known individual in the sutler's store, deeply engaged in a game of high-low-jack. Seated there in his shirt-sleeves, with a dudheen in his teeth, making all the points that were to be had, he was as complete a specimen of the jovial mountaineer as I have yet seen. Gen. BREWSTER and KIT were old friends, and soon were deeply engaged in tracing out the most practicable route from Santa Fé to Pond Creek, a station of the Overland Dispatch Company's on the Smoky Hill route. This business arranged, we set out for "Kronig's Ranch."

Mr. KRONIG thinks that New-York is not much of a place for a young man. He served as "bar keep" for an underground establishment, at a salary of six dollars per month, and was finally discharged for not being willing to pass counterfeit money. After that he started for California. The Indians "cleaned him out" three different times, so he gave it up and turned his attention to farming. He has now, next to MAXWELL'S, the finest farm that we have visited, and a very much better fitted-up residence even than MAXWELL'S.

One of the camels that Lieut. PRUSS brought out is now owned by Mr. KRONIG, who says that the animal keeps himself, but is entirely valueless so far as any useful work is concerned. From Kronig's to Santa Fé, a distance of a little more than a hundred miles, there is no noteworthy place except the "Pecora Church," which was built by the priests that came with CORTEZ. This church has been sold by the Bishop of Santa Fé, and is now being torn down to obtain the adobes to build stables with.

Santa Fé, or City of the Holy Faith, was built by priests that came with HERNANDO CORTEZ. At the time CORTEZ was driven out, these priests were murdered. From this time until ST. VRAIN and a few other Americans settled here, (some forty years since,) but little is known of the place. It has at present between seven and eight thousand inhabitants—Mexicans, Israelites and Americans. The Mexicans are lazy and poor; the Jews commercial and rich; the American population is principally connected to some

way with the Government, or else they have a capital knowledge of cards. Montó is the favorite.

Five Roman Catholic churches, and one Protestant, minus its roof, comprise the places of worship. Two weekly newspapers, printed half in English and half in Spanish, do the necessary wrangling, with a circulation of from four to five hundred each.

Gen. CARLETON has command of the district. He is a gentleman, quiet and capable, with more friends than enemies, and very generally admired.

The hotels, or *fondas*, are tolerably kept, and quite comfortable. Board may be had at three and four dollars per diem.

We arrived on Sunday morning, and went, after the very necessary abjuration to remove travel stain, to the cathedral. The edifice is built of adobe or mammoth brick, made of mud, straw and gravel, then sun-dried; the roof being also of mud and timber. The ornamentation of the interior is rude and complicated—the paintings wretched, but of very brilliant color. The seats or pews make worship convenient; each person must bring a seat or take the floor, which the majority do. The congregation was composed almost entirely of Mexicans, the females being largely in the majority. Our gentle American ladies would scarcely go there to study bonnets, for they are almost unknown—the shawl doing duty in their place.

The male population wear the sombrero and the inevitable blanket or serapé. They seem to be such a "let-me-alone" sort of costumes that one readily agrees to do so.

The next eve we went to a "Baile." That's the polite for fandango. The house in which the baile was held was distinguishable by a dimly-lit lantern that burned in front. Entering, we found a room of eighteen feet in width and forty in length; at one end of which, mounted on a dry-goods box, sat three musicians—violin, clarinet, and a many-stringed guitar.

At the other end of the room was an arrangement that seemed a cross between an apple-stand bar and candy-shop, while on benches ranged along the wall sat the dark damsels that were willing partners for any one. Being assured that no introduction was necessary, we sailed in and secured a partner. The General chose the female of the very grandest proportions in the room. This was fortunate for him, as he was made to do the figures *volens volens*. We were not so fortunate, and got left several times standing alone, while the mazy went on without us. The set completed each gent takes the lady to the before-mentioned variety-store at the end of the room, and she proceeds to load in cakes, candy and apples; also, a glass of wine. This is done after each dance, and it is thus that the proprietor or giver of the baile is remunerated.

It is quite surprising to see the amount of stock the young woman can consume. This accomplished, she proceeds to fill her handkerchief (not a small one either); then her pockets. After this she gets someone to hold the apples, cakes, &c., and goes home with about as much of a load as she can carry.

The sympathies of the people are with JUAREZ, and all manner of rumor is rife with regard to his movement and that of the French.

The last authentic dates from El Paso are of the 26th of January. They give the information that three hundred French cavalry left Chihuahua to attack the Mexicans in force at Conception. The Mexicans retreated; the advance of the retreating column being expected to reach Paso del Norte to-morrow. It is generally believed here that JUAREZ will cross to the American side of the river as soon as the French troops press him.

Business in Santa Fe is extremely dull. The merchants say that it is occasioned by the fact that the Government has not made the usual purchases of corn. Money is very scarce and difficult to obtain on the best of security. Then it can be had for four or five per cent. a month. CLOUIS.