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Bent's Old Fort

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### Books of the Times

New York Times

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# Books of The Times

By CHARLES POORE

ONCE upon a time the American mountain men and the traders at Bent's Fort on the Arkansas ruled a wild empire that ran from southern Wyoming to the challenged lands of Texas and from the middle of Kansas to the peaks of the Rockies.

That time was in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. The boundaries between Mexico and the United States and provinces of the westward-driven Indians were shadowy. The men who crossed them and survived were tough. They often fought one another as enthusiastically as they fought the common enemies of passing days. The story of their lives has the Homeric qualities of daring and wonder. It is excellently told in David Lavender's "Bent's Fort."\*

This would make an outstanding volume about the West in any year. The triumph of Mr. Lavender's scrupulous research and sense of the dramatic scene is that it stands out now in a season when good Western studies are as thick as tourists in Taos.

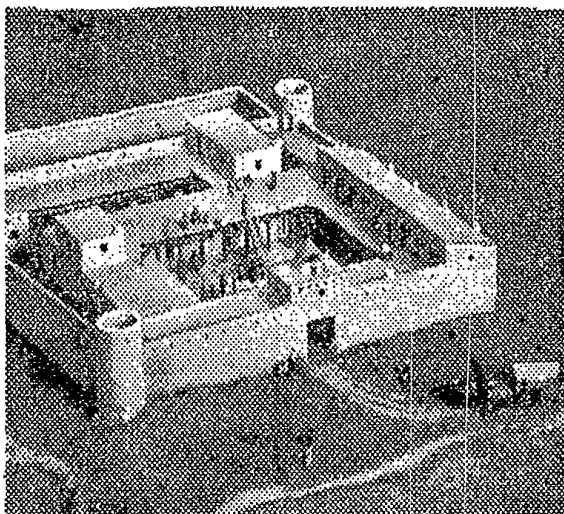
We meet again in "Bent's Fort" many characters we have encountered earlier in Paul Horgan's "Great River," Paul Wellman's "Glory, God and Gold," and other volumes in the course of the year. The long wagon trains that roll forever through the chrome-trimmed offices of the Hollywood picture makers will find bonanzas of adventure in "Bent's Fort." And, in a calmer mood, I hope some of our playwrights will find in its pages something for the living stage.

## Way Stop for Openers of West

Although there is frequently a hard-breathing quality about volumes concerned with topics that are epic, Mr. Lavender stays close to the pulse of ordinary human beings. He knows well enough that the Bent brothers and their partner, Ceran St. Vrain, had fairly dynamic effects on the course of history. But they also had personal lives, when they were not out pushing the frontier westward in accordance with the teachings of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner. These, too, had importance. Therefore, through old diaries and letters, Mr. Lavender traces the stories of their mixed marriages and their efforts to bring the amenities of existence to our wilder landscapes.

When he uses the megaphone he uses it sparingly. "Call the roll of the pathbreakers," he says. "Carson, Beckwourth, Old Bill Williams, Maxwell, Walker, Wooton, Fitzpatrick of the broken hand, Frémont, and a host of others, Bent and St. Vrain gave them work or shelter as they opened the Southwest. Once the way was prepared, New Mexico, Arizona and California were inevitably lost, not to 20,000 American troops but in a large measure to 1,700 ragged soldiers of Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West marching out from their rendezvous at Bent's Fort."

That's absolutely true. But what makes Mr.



Model of Bent's Fort

Lavender's book more than a series of roll calls and forays in behalf of Manifest Destiny is the way he gives believable life to those historic characters. Take the first name on his roll, for example, the celebrated Kit Carson, hunter, trapper, scout. Once again we see him as part of the animated frieze of lonely argonauts on the high peaks, gradually increasing his pace as the story advances until he becomes at times merely a blur carrying tremendously important news West to East, East to West, westoeast, eastowest, westoeastowest. Like that.

## When Carson Had a Respite

The refreshing pause comes when Kit Carson begins to grow a trifle fed up with being a perpetual carrier pigeon between California and St. Louis and the first man to be routed out when Indian war whoops signal another rampage. Along comes Frémont, champing to rip open new paths to Eldorado, demanding the services of Carson and finding that Carson is on the Little Cimarron in New Mexico, planting a crop and building a house with a view to settling down.

But will Manifest Destiny personified let him? Not much! Fifty or sixty pages later he's still trying to domesticate himself, still planning a house, "tired out by his courier trips back and forth across the continent" and finding no rest on earth. Can't someone make a play out of the frontiersman's desire to have some measure of the ease that surrounds people who read books about them a century later?

Some parts of Mr. Lavender's story of the Bents and their friends and exploits are built on surmise. But it is surmise projected from documentary logic. When he comes to something really wreathed in mystery, he says so. For instance, the mystery of just why the wily Spanish Governor of New Mexico, Armijo, gave way before the westward march of the Americans under Kearny has had many explanations. Chief among them, of course, being bribery. But that has not yet been proved to the hilt. And Mr. Lavender is curiously scant about discussing the expedition that Doniphan led into Mexico, possibly because the objectives lay beyond the reaches of even so vast a territory as the Bents' Adobe Empire.

\*BENT'S FORT. A historical account of the Adobe Empire that shaped the destiny of the American Southwest. By David Lavender. 449 pages. Endpaper maps. Doubleday. \$5.50.