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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

IN Taos they tell the story of a rancher whose hobby was collecting odd and bright rocks on mountain journeys. One day a visitor brought a Geiger counter into his living room and the machine began to sound off enthusiastically. The stone that caused the uproar seemed obviously rich in uranium. Where had the rancher found it? He tried for weeks to return to the right scene, crossing and recrossing the mountains, but never found the place at all.

David Lavender is more fortunate. The West where he was born and where his fortune lies produces tales and chronicles in unending abundance. In December, 1954, he published "Bent's Fort," a historical account of the opening of the Southwest that ranks with the best in our literature. A decade or so earlier he had written "One Man's West,"* a string of vividly realistic memoirs of his own youth on the ranches and in the mines of the wild country where southern Colorado and Utah meet. This book he has now brought up to date with new material on the changing ways of life out there. Not having read the first version when it came out in the middle of the war, I found it fresh and pungent reading. It's worth several dozen standard-brand romances about cowpokes and rustlers.

Remembrance of Glowing Days

It should be said, in all candor, that not all cattlemen would agree with that. They get a special sort of enjoyment, Mr. Lavender tells us, in reading the roaring yarns of the pulps. It gives them, he supposes, "a nice chesty feeling out of seeing their drab trade glorified to the tune of crashing guns and red death." No doubt, the hippic epics of the widening motion picture screens bring the same solace. And if they have a chance to share the experience of New Yorkers, who, I firmly believe, can tune their televisions into a scene showing the sheriff's posse riding for the pass at any hour of the day or night, they may ultimately reach six-gun surfeit.

Anyway, Mr. Lavender himself does not look back drably to his days in the saddle. The truth would seem to be that he is rather proud of them, in a deprecating way. You share, as you read, the baffling vexations of trying to find forage for leanly thundering herds, the bedevilments of nature and of man. Yet this, at its worst, is better than working in run-down mines whose prosperity rose or fell in rhythm with the world's need for gold and silver and the atomic age's special fiery particles.

The good earth of his native ranges, he says flatly, is not so good. But it is touched with splendor:

"The region is dominated—the word is utterly factual here—by some of the ruggedest peaks of the Rockies. Twelve thousand, thirteen thousand, even fourteen thousand feet high, they overlook it all. They are your glistening landmarks when you are on the trail with cattle or sheep; they furnish, besides their own immediate store of metals, the moisture for yourself and your fields; the canyons produced by their streams are your highways; the storms they breed can wipe out in twenty-four hours the work of years.

*ONE MAN'S WEST. By David Lavender. Revised edition. With drawings by William Arthur Smith. 316 pages. Doubleday. \$3.95.



Jacket design by William Arthur Smith

To the westward, the land falls sharply, Mr. Lavender reminds us, "down through forests of spruce and aspen to long gray flats of sagebrush, bordered by emerald ridges and black stands of piñon pine," toward the rivers that rush through "growling gorges" toward the sea. And in all this long stretch, empty as it may look, "man performs his strange antics"—as he does, for that matter, in other ways, in other parts of the planet.

Lure of Malevolent Terrain

The Westerner, he goes on to suggest, curses the country's orneriness mightily. But, meantime, he "strings his jealous barbed wire around whatever chunks of it can be managed at all, squabbles over its water, alternately tortures and fondles it into giving him life—only to have it rear up, occasionally, with appalling forms of death—and in the end comes to an absurd affection, rarely confessed, for the particular part of it he has most reason to hate."

In fact, his hatred for drought and flash flood, of course, is balanced by the sense of accomplishment he feels in survival. There are special enmities, long cherished, as it were, between sheepmen and cattlemen, between the settlers who want to farm and the advocates of the open range. Even successive generations of miners have their own versions of the good old, bad old days.

When Mr. Lavender went back, a short time ago, to show his young son the scene of a family ranch, he saw, in new ruin, a house that had been half transformed into a club for mining V. I. P.'s and then abandoned. One feature had been completed—a big fireplace built of sandstone that recapitulated, in layers, the geologic structure of the region. That rock was perhaps millions of years older than any transient residents, but Mr. Lavender saw in the fireplace a modern symbolism—a recent mining venture dominating the wreckage of a ranch. One of these days, perhaps, it will chiefly interest a passer-by carrying the successor to the Geiger counter in future realms of alchemy.