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Bent's Old Fort

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Freemont and Carson Slept Here

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Fremont and Carson Slept Here

BENT'S FORT. By David Lavender.
450 pp. New York: Doubleday &
Co. \$5.50.

By HOFFMAN BIRNEY

SOME five miles east of La Junta, Colo., north of Highway 50 and the shallow Arkansas River, a simple marker indicates the site of Bent's Fort, once the largest and most pretentious structure between the Missouri frontier and the Pacific. Charles and William Bent and their partner, Ceran St. Vrain, reared the massive adobe walls in 1833. They were veterans of the fur trade, of commerce with Mexico, and of scores of trading ventures with the Indians. The fort was used throughout its short life as a trading post but the Mexican War and the restless tide of westward migration made it famous.

It would be difficult to name one prominent figure in frontier history who was not sheltered there during the years 1834 to 1849. Kearny and Doniphan and the Army of the

Mr. Birney, author of "Vigilantes" and other books dealing with the American Southwest, frequently writes on our frontier history.

West; the shrewd James Magoffin and his bride; Fremont and Carson; Marcy and Dodge and other military men beyond counting; Old Bill Williams and other trappers by the score. To some it was home, to others a welcome surcease from the hardships of the trail.

In 1849, William Bent (Charles had been killed in the Taos revolt of 1847) placed kegs of gunpowder here and there and set fire to the structure. The popular—and probably erroneous—belief is that he was disgruntled by the Government's failure to buy the outpost.

David Lavender, whose "The Big Divide" was a noteworthy history of the Rockies, has told the story of Bent's Fort in a book that from beginning to end is as thrilling as fiction. It is far more than an account of the post's fifteen years—it is the story of the fur trade, of the Santa Fe Trail and its commerce, of Indian and Mexican battles and of incidents in the lives of men who set their names on the land from the Big Horns to the Rio Grande.

All too frequently the book which results from exhaustive research is as dry as the yellow-

ing files in historical archives. Not so with "Bent's Fort." Here is history as it should be written with action as swift as that of well-paced fiction and as refreshing as the breeze from the Spanish Peaks. This book proves once again that the history of the great Southwest needs no overplaying to make its point: the mere facts stand as drama by themselves.



From the jacket design by
George Mayer for "Bent's Fort."