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Bent's Old Fort

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Round Trip from Denver is Rich in History

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ROUND TRIP FROM DENVER IS RICH IN HISTORY

By MARSHALL SPRAGUE

FORT GARLAND, Colo.—Enthusiasm for regional history is rife hereabouts, with multitudes of people combing the country for old bones or leafing through popular booklets on local heroines like Baby Doe Tabor about whom an opera has been written.

Recorded history goes really far back, out here, thanks to the dry climate which has preserved a tree-ring chronology dating natural events—fossilized for the most part—almost to Christ's time. This is for the geologists.

A second preservative is the State Historical Society of Colorado, founded in 1879 and running today on an annual state budget of \$130,000. This is for the state's human history.

The society owns five historical sites, the thousand-mile circuit of which, in this reporter's view, is as romantic, as illuminating and as indescribably beautiful as any other motor tour in the West. Besides, the trout fishing is superb in spots.

On the Great Plains

Five days from Denver and back again will do it nicely. One can spend the first day on the Great Plains which almost nobody looks at hard enough to see their unique charms—a 250-mile trip southeast to the site of Bent's Fort, by way of U. S. 287 through Limon and Eads, to U. S. 50 on the Arkansas River, and then west to the railroad town of La Junta. En route to Bent's Fort is Bijou Basin where Plains Indians found buffalo even as late as 1880. At Eads, intrepid historians can detour eleven miles east to Chivington where Miss Mary Marble, the postmistress, will describe the unmarked road running nine miles to the spot where the Sand Creek Massacre occurred on Nov. 29, 1864. It was a sad day in western annals.

Bent's Fort, a short side-trip out of La Junta, was a great adobe trading post on the north bank of the Arkansas, a Union Station of the western world, focal point of American expansion and of trade with Mexico and the Indians. The Bent Brothers built it in 1834 and for a decade the West's immortals gathered there—Kit Carson and Tom Fitzpatrick, Ceran St. Vrain and John Charles Frémont.

Its commercial value waned by 1849. William Bent aban-



Ward Allan Howe

OURAY'S ROOFTOPS—This is a favored spot with movie makers and uranium hunters.

doned it and it became a stage stop until the Civil War, and then a community corral, until its mud walls melted into the ground. The Historical Society acquired the site in 1953. Today, the vast original foundations, excavated by students of Trinidad State Junior College, can be viewed.

La Junta has good accommodations for a first night with Colorado history. Next morning the car should be pointed at the blue Spanish Peaks on State Route 10 which veers from the Ratan Pass-bound Santa Fe Trail. At Walsenburg, one takes U. S. 160, crossing the lovely Sangre de Cristos.

Beyond La Veta Pass, one is stunned suddenly by the incredible gray-green land-ocean of the San Luis Valley below, with the Continental Divide rising snowily far on the other side, and Fort Garland in the foreground sprawled at the foot of mighty Mount Blanca.

Garland was built in 1858 (replacing near-by Fort Massachusetts) to guard San Luis Valley settlers against the Ute Indians. Its whitewashed adobe barracks and officers' quarters, its shady parade ground and flagpole,

have been wonderfully restored by the Historical Society.

From June to October, the thirty-seven star flag which Col. Kit Carson flew as fort commander there can be seen, and also the place where the two heads of the famous Espinosa boys are said to be buried. The Espinosas tried to continue the Mexican War indefinitely by killing thirty-odd Americans over the years. Tom Tobin finally bagged them near La Veta Pass and turned in their heads for the bounty.

Enchiladas for Lunch

One can lunch on enchiladas here at Garland and drive south on State Route 159 to San Luis, and west to Romeo on State Route 142 through the Mormon town of Manassa, birthplace of the Manassa Mauler, Jack Dempsey. North briefly on U. S. 285 to La Jara leads to Pike's Stockade, a short detour of immense complication, but worth making.

In 1806, Lieut. Zebulon Pike and a few soldiers were sent up the Arkansas River to see if the Rockies were really there. Pike invented Pikes Peak, wandered into San Luis Valley, then Spanish territory,

and built a small log stockade on the Conejos River to rest up in. Before he and his men got much rest, Spanish officials from Santa arrived and arrested the whole party. They spent three months in the Chihuahua jail for trespassing.

The Historical Society has restored Pike's thirty-six-foot-square stockade and the spot's enchantment is enhanced by the difficulty of finding it. Pheasants, doves, ducks and deer make loud noises in the underbrush and it is time to toss a fly in the Conejos, a splendid trout stream. Toward evening, there is time to continue north on U. S. 285 to Alamosa on the Rio Grande for the night. There, at Kit Carson Trading Post on Main Street, flourishes the Valley's genial celebrity, Kit Carson 3d, grandson of the greatest of mountain men.

Heading west through Durango and north to see the Chief Ouray Historical Monument near Montrose, the drive involves 310 miles of continuous Alpine splendor, including the heart-moving Wolf Creek Pass over the Continental Divide and then the northward stretch through the San Juan Mountains, the most precipitous pyra-

mid in North America. This Million-Dollar Highway (built of gold-bearing gravel) goes through Silverton and Ouray where the flying jeeps are full of uranium hunters and Western movie stars on location.

Chief Ouray was Colorado's great Indian leader and his monument memorializes also the Ute Indian bands who held these mountains for centuries against all comers until 1881 when the irresistible pressure of white immigration forced them to give up most of their homeland. The Historical Society has just created a Ute Indian Museum of exhibits and dioramas at the monument. Near it is the tomb of Ouray's wife Chipeta, Colorado's equivalent of Pocahontas.

Silver Town

The monument is on the banks of the Uncompahgre River where the fishing is good, but it is better on the Gunnison, along which a fourth historical day can be spent, after a night at Montrose. U. S. 50 runs east through Gunnison town and over Monarch Pass for 127 miles to U. S. 285 and north for sixty miles on U. S. 24 to Leadville. This town, at 10,150 feet, is the highest settlement of town-size in the United States. It has also been the world's richest producer of silver since 1878.

The Historical Society maintains in Leadville a period piece called the Healy House, filled with relics of the Eighteen Eighties and run by the timeless Mrs. Marian (Poppy) Smith who knows more about the old camp than anyone else. Adjoining is the Dexter Cabin where Leadville tycoons played draw poker with fabulous silver mines at stake. Other Leadville sights are the old home of H. A. W. Tabor, Colorado's best-known nabob, the Tabor Grand Hotel (now the Vendôme) and the Matchless Mine which figured in Douglas Moore's opera, "The Ballad of Baby Doe."

The last night can be spent out at Dillon, thirty-four miles from Leadville on State Route 91 over Frémont Pass. The trip in to Denver next day is only seventy-eight miles, but it includes Loveland Pass, one of the state's most spectacular. A detour at Idaho Springs off the Denver Road leads to Central City, Colorado's first mining metropolis, but Central's history requires another five days at least, and might be saved for another visit out here.