

Bent's Fort – The Only Civilization on the Sante Fe Trail

After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the economic expansion started westward. Trappers moved into the Rockies to trap fur; Indian tribes showed a willingness to trade goods for buffalo hides; wagon trails rolled from Independence, Missouri to Sante Fe, Mexico to establish trade.

When the Charles and William Bent brothers, and their partner Ceran St. Vrain, were looking for a site to build their trading post, they wanted a location that would capture all three of these trade opportunities. They finally settled on the north bank of the Arkansas River, which at that time was the boundary between the United States and Mexico. This location was close enough to the Rockies, in the hunting ground of the Cheyenne, Arapaho and Kiowa, and at a river crossing point on the Santa Fe trail. It is here I began my tour of Old Bent's Fort.



As soon as I enter the front gate, I smell the wood smoke wafting from the fire fueled by cottonwood harvested down by the river. Next, my ears ring from the incessant clanking of the blacksmith's hammer. With the sights, smells and period-costumed participants, I easily drift back to 1846 when Bent's Fort was the only civilization between Independence, Missouri and Santa Fe.

Bent's Fort was different from most Western frontier forts in that it was not a military base, but a fur trade center built in 1833. For the next 16 years, it would be a hub of activity for travelers heading south and local Indian tribes trading furs for goods. With its location on the Arkansas River and its adobe structure and bastions, it was "the Castle on the Plains". Reconstructed in 1975 by the National Park Service to its exact standard on the exact site, Bent's Old Fort was, and still is, quite a place.



The First Floor

After entering through the front gate, I turn left and immediately come to the Council Room. This was considered neutral ground and a place where Indians and fort owners could work out grievances, both real and perceived on both sides.

Next, I come to the Trade Room or General Store. With its shelves stocked with calico, blankets, muskets, gun powder, flint, knives, clay pipes, kettles, coffee, corn and chocolate, it was the only place on the Santa Fe trail where travelers, Indians and fur trappers could exchange real money or “hairy bank notes” - beaver pelts and later buffalo hides - for goods.



Next, I enter the Dining Room. After two months on the trail, most travelers found it a treat to sit down and eat at a table like “civilized people”. It is also a place where all classes of people could freely mingle at various social events.

Conveniently located next to the Dining Room is the Kitchen. Wafting from there would be the smells of wild duck, turkey, pronghorn, venison and buffalo. Other food included rice, almonds, raisins, cheese, bacon, salt pork and molasses, in addition to the staples of coffee, sugar and salt.

At the back of the fort, directly across from the front gate, were the Blacksmith and Carpenter shops. These two trades were vital to the fort as this is where wagons were repaired using parts salvaged or made in order to keep commerce moving. Wagons were the forts lifeblood both in shipping furs and hides out, and bringing in goods to the fort.



Continuing on in a clockwise direction, I come to the Warehouse. Here, buffalo hides were purchased or traded for goods for \$0.25 each. In turn, Bent & Company sold them from \$3 to \$6 each – a 1,200% to 2,400% profit.

During the height of the fort, 15,000 bales of fur each year were shipped back to Independence, Missouri by wagon and then transported by riverboat and sold in St Louis. Each bale contained 8 to 10 buffalo hides and weighted about 100 pounds. Buffalo hides were the only monetary source Indians had to get the goods they wanted. Unknowingly at the time, this trade market began the demise of the buffalo population, never again to recover their numbers.

Next is the Well Room. One of the unexpected delicacies found at the fort was ice. After days and days of breathing in dust while on the Trail, having an ice-cold drink of well water was a refreshing respite from the daily grind of traveling.

Living Quarters by Class

There were different classes of people employed within the fort and it was clear who was in



which class by their quarters or provided housing. The Laborer's Quarters housed travelers and common laborers in the fort. Because the fort was built by Mexicans familiar with adobe construction, many stayed at the fort with their families to work at the fort. Las Senioritas prepared meals for their families and travelers in their small kitchens using their fireplaces as stoves.

Between the Kitchen and the Blacksmith shop were the quarters of William Bent. Bent was in charge of the fort and especially oversaw the trading operation with trappers and Indians. Having married a Cheyenne woman named Owl Woman, he was connected by marriage to the tribe. Later, he also ended up marrying her sister, Yellow Woman.

His quarters, as expected, were much different from the laborers. He has a washstand, desk and other items reflective of his Missouri upbringing. Also found in his residence were Indian handiwork, such as buckskins and quillwork, courtesy of his Cheyenne wives.



Above the Warehouse on the second story, were living quarters for other employees of the fort, other than common laborers and their families, and where trappers stayed when at the fort. Hunters employed by the fort, including Kit Carson, stayed here also.

On the second floor, Clerks of the fort had their quarters. Their main job was overseeing the security, handling and accounting for the trade goods. While most of the other employees were illiterate, clerks could read, write and they understood the value of the different money units used in trading. Many of the original trade ledgers were used to accurately stock the fort during the reconstruction in 1975.

Right above the kitchen were the living quarters of the other fort's partner, Ceran St. Vrain. When he was not staying in his quarters, it became a guest room for notables passing through.

The Second Floor

Dr. Hempstead, the fort's doctor, was known for his well-stocked library as well as his physician skills. As visitor Lewis H. Garrard recalls, it "afforded recreation and pastime during the dull intervals of the day". In these quarters also, Susan Magofflin recuperated after suffering a miscarriage upon reaching the fort in 1846. Magofflin was the first white woman to travel the Santa Fe trail and to document her travels.



Another unexpected pleasure at the fort was the Billiard Room. Besides having a billiard table, the room was used to play board games, including chess, backgammon and checkers. Also in this room was a small bar located in one corner of the room. According to the company's ledger in 1839, the bar was stocked with 12 boxes of wine, 37 gallons of brandy and 58 gallons of rum.

On opposite corners from each other, two round watchtowers, called bastions, were built. Located in this way, guards in each bastion could observe two walls. Each bastion was armed with a swivel cannon, but neither was ever used in defense of the fort. Instead, they were used as signaling devices announcing the arrival of trade caravans coming from Independence or Santa Fe.



This fort was known as Bent's Fort until a new fort was built 40 miles downriver in 1853. The death of Charles Bent in Taos, declining buffalo herds, and finally a cholera epidemic which killed thousands of Indians finally killed the trade in this location and prompted the move downstream. To keep the two locations distinctive, this one became known as Old Bent's Fort. There is no better place today to experience the old trading West than here.

If You Go:

Bent's Old Fort is located 8 miles east of La Junta, CO on Colorado State Highway 194. Entrance fees are \$3.00 for age 13 and above, \$2.00 for children 6 – 12 years old and free for children 5 and under.

Hours of operation are:

- 8am - 5:30pm from June 1 to August 31
- 9am - 4pm from September 1 to May 31.

Regardless of when you go, period-costumed tradesman and other company employees will be at the fort working their jobs, much as they did in the early 1800s. The fort is complete with period tools, furniture and buildings. With re-enactors dressing and acting the part, modern-day visitors will get a true sense of what life was like for those staying over at the fort.

Photographs:

All photos by Ron Kness.

Contributor's Bio:

Ron Kness is a travel writer/photographer with articles and photos published in various house publications, in-flight magazines and other media sources. Ron is keenly interested in the United States history from after the Revolutionary War through the Civil War.