Bent's Fort in 1846

By Edgeley W. Todd*

Interest in Bent's Fort, the most important stronghold of United States expansion into the Southwest, has always been great. Recently David Lavender's book-length study of the Bents and the trading empire that they and St. Vrain controlled has focused attention anew upon this post on the Arkansas River in southern Colorado. The recent excavation of the foundations of the fort, as reported in newspapers and in a recent issue of *The Colorado Magazine,* has furnished new evidence concerning the actual physical layout of the fort, and provided much information about its construction.

An item of exceptional interest which gives another description of Bent's Old Fort as it appeared to a contemporary observer one hundred years ago seems to have been overlooked by research workers until now. Who this observer was has not been determined; but unlike many travellers who visited the fort and left us either no description at all or only generalized ones, he took pains to record his impressions in detail. His description of the fort was printed in the *Saint Louis Reveille* on May 17, 1846.

St. Louis newspapers of that era and during the preceding decades are full of references to enterprises in the trans-Mississippi

country—to explorations, fur trading activities, the Santa Fe trade, emigration to California and the Oregon Territory, and similar undertakings—as expansion, glorified with the name of Manifest Destiny, moved westward. What gave special relevance to a description of Bent’s Fort in May of 1846, however, was the fact of war with Mexico. That this was foremost in the minds of the editors, Charles Keenle and Joseph M. Field, is evident from editorial remarks prefacing the article: "Fort William, or Bent's Fort, on the Arkansas," they wrote, "—the boundary line between our Indian territory and New Mexico—is a point which is destined to become of deep importance, as events are urging; and the following accurate description of it, with the neighboring country, must possess much interest at the present moment."

Just how urgent these events were the editors did not spell out. But newspaper readers in 1846 would not have needed special briefing. An illustration of why they would not is furnished by a striking coincidence. The same issue of the *Reveille* that carried the article on Bent’s Fort also carried a special news item reprinted "From our Extra of 12 o'clock last night." This in essence was an announcement of the opening of the Mexican War, which Congress declared on May 12, 1846. Of the numerous events and territorial ambitions that had led up to that decision, one decisive action precipitating hostilities was the crossing of the Nueces River by Mexican General Arista in the preceding April. The Americans regarded this movement as an invasion of their territory in Texas, and President Polk urged Congress to act. He signed the proclamation of war on May 13.

General Zachary Taylor in the meantime was already poised on the lower Rio Grande with an army. Even before Congress declared war, he had pushed the Mexicans back across the Rio Grande. After the declaration he led his army against the Mexican coastal city of Matamoros at the mouth of the river. It was this attack that was announced in the *Reveille* on May 17—in a column alongside the final part of the Bent’s Fort article. Headlines read: "GLORIOUS NEWS!!! The Mexican Hawks Defeated! Victory of General Taylor! 700 of the Enemy Slay!! Matamoros in Ashes!!!!" A column of news reported this stroke in detail.

With events of this character taking place on our southern border, it is not strange that the *Reveille* editors regarded Bent’s Fort as "a point which is destined to become of deep importance" or that they should have considered a description of it of peculiar interest to their readers "at the present moment."

That the author of the article also viewed Bent’s Fort in terms of the conflict with Mexico—and indeed slanted it in that direc-
This was, in fact, the year the late Bernard DeVoto has so aptly called "the year of decision." Affairs of great moment were taking place all over the West. Fremont was maneuvering on the Pacific coast and would seize Upper California in the autumn. The Mormon Saints were on the march across the plains to establish an empire in the Salt Lake basin. The members of the so-called Donner party, representative Americans looking for a new place in the sun, were rolling along the boundary dispute with Great Britain to come to a peaceful settlement in June. And above all, as part of the planned attack against Mexico and her possessions, the Army of the West—some 1600 dragoons and volunteers commanded by Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny—was to start that same June from Fort Leavenworth down the Santa Fe trail on the long trek that would ultimately lead to the subduing of New Mexico and the conquest of California, with a stop-over in late July at Bent’s Fort to pick up supplies and recondition men and horses after the torturing heat and drought of the plains.

Other visitors would also see the fort this summer of 1846. George Frederick Ruxton, young Lewis Garrard, and Francis Parkman all converged upon Bent’s post on the Arkansas and left literary records of their visits: Ruxton in two books, Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains and Life in the Far West, Garrard in his sprightly Wah-to-Yah and the Taos Trail, and Parkman in his classic The California and Oregon Trail (later simply titled The Oregon Trail). Any one of them could have written the account printed below but probably didn’t.

The Reveille article gives another impression of some of these events and experiences. History records the role that Bent’s Fort was playing in actions that were to render decisive changes in the drama that was being enacted on our western borders. To realize some of these implications is to add another level of meaning to the words of the anonymous writer who took time to describe Bent’s Fort in the crucial spring of 1846.

What follows duplicates in full the text as printed originally in the Saint Louis Reveille:

**Bent’s Fort—The Rendezvous.**

Fort William, or Bent’s Fort, on the Arkansas—the boundary line between our Indian territory and New Mexico—is a point which is destined to become of deep importance, as events are urging; and the following accurate description of it, with the neighboring country, must possess much interest at the present moment. The writer is a most intelligent friend of ours, now at the fort, and the letter, from which we extract, has been received within a short time by a mutual acquaintance.

**Description of Bent’s Fort.**

From a photostat furnished by the Newberry Library, Chicago. Since the present article was written and submitted for publication, Dr. Noble Murry’s book entitled, Old Forts and Trading Posts of the West. Bent’s Old Fort and Bent’s New Fort on the Arkansas River, Vol. I. (Denver: Arcraft Press, 1916), has been published. Part of the Reveille item has been used therewith on pages 35-36. —Editor.
from the Spanish settlements. Milk, poultry, butter, eggs, &c., are kind of indigenous affairs. All we lack is potatoes, which we shall try to raise the coming season.

There were twelve cows kept at the fort to furnish milk for the winter, and now there are thirty that could be put in requisition, if necessary. The company keep a large stock of cattle, employing Mexicans to herd them. These men can be had for from six to eight dollars per month, payable in goods, at an advance, on an average, of five hundred per cent. They are good workers, and attentive to their business, which is all that can be said in their favor. To show you how very choice they are in names, I will introduce you to Maria Jesus Arriano, our cow-herd; a more sinister-looking, dirty scamp you could never wish to meet with. They are all a poor, cowardly, despicable, thievish, gambling set—but little removed from the Indian, and only fit to drudge, break wild horses and mules, and herd cattle and sheep in this world, and be in the next; which latter fate inevitably awaits them, unless they speedily reform, of which, at present, there are no hopes.

Bent’s Fort is on the main branch of the Arkansas river, eighteen hundred miles from its mouth, and one hundred and thirty to its source in the mountains. Though dignified with the sobriquet of river, the stream here is, in reality, only a creek, being no more, in ordinary stages of water, than thirty or forty yards wide; but what gives it more consequence is its being the boundary line between the American and New Mexican possessions, which latter are on the west or opposite side from us, and within short cannon shot range. The country far about is a wilderness, and must ever remain so, from the scarcity of timber and general sterility of soil; which, however, though light and sandy, produces a sufficiency of herbage for the sustenance of vast herds of gregarious animals roaming the plains, and will always afford a home for such Indian nations as live by the chase. Around us are the most powerful and warlike Indian tribes on the continent—the Comanches, the Kiawas, the Arrapahos, the Yutas, the Cheyennes, the Apaches and the Pawnees—all buffalo-eaters, and all great scamps. St. Louis being in north latitude \(38^\circ 37' 28''\), makes us, according to Lieut. Fremont’s observations, \(35^\circ 28''\) south, and \(14^\circ\) of longitude west of you. I suppose there is no great difference in the seasons or temperature, except that here we are not subject to the sudden changes which are experienced with you, and are blessed with a pure and exhilarating atmosphere. The coldest and most piercing winds come from the northeast, and (as much of an antithesis as it may seem) the warmest and softest winds from the north-west, sweeping from the very top of the snow-clad mountains. The climate is salubrious—delightful.