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Bent's Old Fort

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Report from Bent's Old Fort

La Junta Tribune Democrat

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BENTS OLD FORT*La Junta Tribune-Democrat. 10-2-69, p. 4*

Fort, A Series by Robert E. Davidson, Historian
Bent's Fort



Skeleton found beneath carpenter shop floor at Bent's Old Fort in January 1965.

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY

On a cold January day in 1965, a routine test of earth immediately beneath the carpenter's shop floor on the fort's south side revealed a surprising find — the skeletons of two people buried side-by-side. Archaeologists proceeded to carefully remove the remains for further study and noted some unusual things. First, one skeleton indicated burial had been accomplished in a "flexed" or traditional Indian position with the knees drawn up tightly and arms folded across the chest. The second skeleton, however, appeared to have been buried in haste without such care. Secondly, the graves did not contain any of the possessions typical of Indian burials, which the positioning of the one skeleton indicated these to be.

In order to confirm his suspicions that the skeletons were indeed Indians, Archaeologist Moore sent the bones to the University of Kansas for analysis by experts in the field of physical anthropology. Dr. William Bass, after careful examination concluded the following: both skeletons were female American Indians; one 20-35 years old at death, the other 30-45 years old.

Helpful though this information was, it did not explain the location of the graves within the fort grounds and "Smokey" Moore was left with two possible explanations to choose from. On the one hand, perhaps the burials had been made prior to the fort's construction and by sheer coincidence Bent had picked the site for his trading post not realizing the existence of unmarked graves. On the other hand, was a much more sinister explanation. It might have been that the two had died as the result of foul play and were surreptitiously buried within the fort walls to prevent adverse effects on the fort's relations with the Indians of the area. Since there is no physical evidence to conclusively prove either of the alternatives, the mystery may never be solved. This incident is an excellent example of what often makes archaeological and historical investigation a fascinating business.