

University of Northern Colorado

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Bent's Old Fort

Colorado National Parks

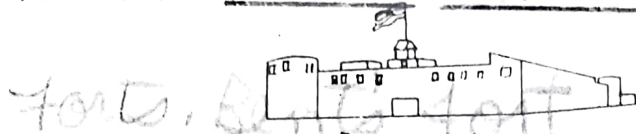
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### Report from Bent's Old Fort

La Junta Tribune Democrat

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**BENTS OLD FORT***La Junta Tribune-Democrat, 1-30-69**p. 4  
c. 3*

A series by Robert E. Davidson, Historian

**"SCARS THAT NEVER HEAL"**

Wherever man has explored new frontiers and opened up new territory he has left his mark on the land. Sometimes these marks are as vivid as a devastated forest or a polluted stream. In other instances, they may be as subtle as a footprint or wagon track. Although nature is able to heal some of these scars quickly, others may linger on for centuries. An example of the latter can be seen at Bent's Old Fort today: Our Santa Fe trail ruts.

Although the last wagon to use them probably passed here 100 years ago, the marks made by many hundreds of wheels are still plainly visible in the prairie sod. They, of course, are not unique to our area. Many miles of the old trail can also be seen in the states of Kansas, Oklahoma and New Mexico. In addition to these, there are also many miles of stage coach routes leading to and from early settlements. Approaching Bent's Fort from the north is a stage road used in the late 1860s which connected the Union Pacific end-of-track at Kit Carson with a station located in the remains of Bent's old trading post.

Tracking down and locating these old ruts can provide for many fascinating hours and leave you with a feeling of discovery that makes the effort worthwhile. The best clues for relocating these old trails are found in a variety of books written on the subject. Many contain useful maps indicating general route locations. For more specific references, one can check diaries of travelers on the trail. These often describe landmarks which are still well known in your area such as Timpas Creek near La Junta. One of the best techniques used, however, is the aerial photograph. These pictures, taken from high altitude for mapping and other purposes, will invariably show clear rut scars in the prairie which may be completely obscured to an observer on the ground. Our ruts here at the fort site were first noticed in such a photograph.

Although it is fun to find traces of these old roads, let us remember that they represent more than just a convenient route from one place to another. Let us remember that they mark the relentless spread of civilization and that where civilized man has set foot, the land and its native people have rarely survived unmarred and unchanged. We should never fail to praise our forefathers for their tremendous achievements, but let us also learn from their mistakes!