

COLORADO TRAPPERS & TRADERS – TRADERS

Bison Ecology

Bison (or Buffalo) were important to Indians tribes living on or near the plains. For these Indians the bison was a "walking grocery store." When Americans began to move onto the plains in the early 1800s, the bison became even more important. First, bison was a main source of food for both groups. Second, Americans valued bison robes and hides. These items became important trade goods between the Indians and Americans. So great was the Americans' demand for these items that buffalo hunting vastly increased and the numbers of buffalo soon began to decline.

Bison Covering The Plains

The artist who made this drawing shows the plains covered with hundreds of bison. This was the way the plains must have looked to Indians and the first whites who traveled the plains in the early 1800s. Before the Europeans came to the western hemisphere, Indians living in North America hunted buffalo. But Indians traveled only on foot and buffalo were hard to hunt and kill. That was one reason why there were so many buffalo in North America. With the horses brought by Europeans, Indians became much better buffalo hunters.



Bison Plains

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory, Congressional Serial Set #1054

More About This Topic

The Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca was the first European to see a buffalo on the plains. The year was 1535. The place was the plains region of North America. From that time until the middle of the 1800s, most travelers who entered the Great Plains told of the thousands of buffalo they saw.

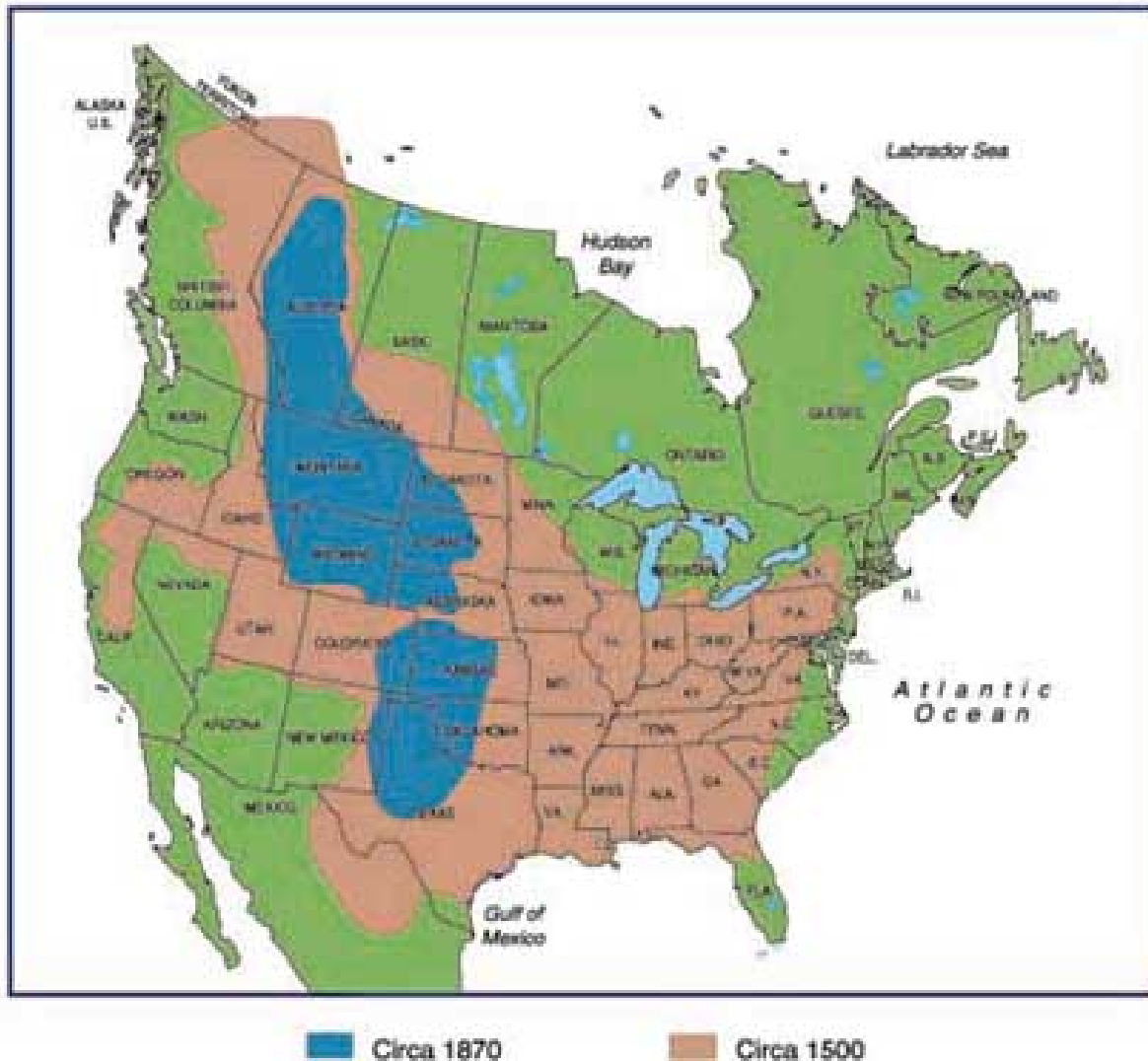
Their Own Words

"In the afternoon [we] discovered the north side of the [Arkansas] river to be covered with animals; which, when we came to them proved to be buffalo cows and calves. I do not think it an exaggeration to say there were 3,000 in one view. It is worthy of remark, that in all the extent of country yet crossed, we never saw one cow, and that now the face of the earth appeared to be covered with them."

Source: Zebulon M. Pike. 1805. The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, with Letters and Related Documents. Donald Jackson, Ed. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966: 339.

The Range Of The Buffalo

The map to the right shows where bison lived (also known as their range) at two points in time. The pink area on the map shows their range in the year 1500. That year was about the time that Europeans first arrived in the western hemisphere. The blue area shows where bison lived in 1870. Between these two points in time, the range of the bison decreased greatly. The number of bison also declined greatly.



Range of the Buffalo

Photo: National Bison Association, Bison Central

More About This Topic

Naturalists have estimated that at their peak, between 50 and 75 million bison lived in North America. By the year 1800, bison had disappeared from east of the Mississippi River. In that same year, experts

think that around 30 million bison lived west of the Mississippi. Less than 100 years later, in 1889, there were only 259 bison left in North America.

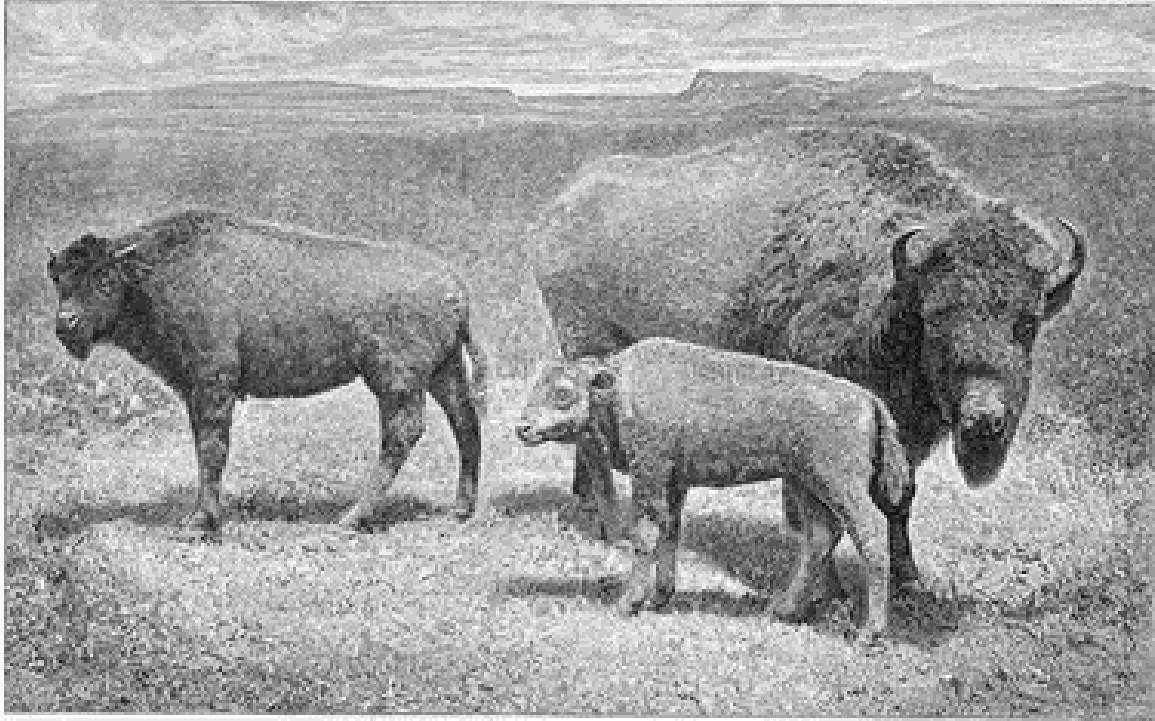
Their Own Words

"It is a singular fact within the last two years the prairies, extending from the mountains to a hundred miles or more down the Arkansa [River], have been entirely abandoned by the buffalo. Indeed, in crossing from the settlements of New Mexico, the boundary of their former range is marked by skulls and bones, which appear fresher as the traveler advances westward and towards the waters of the Platte. . . . With the exception of the Bayou Salado [Colorado's south park], one of their favorite pastures, they are now rarely met with in large bands on the upper waters of the Arkansa. . . ."

Source: George Frederick Ruxton, Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tail of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War, ed. Horace Kephart. New York: Macmillan, 1924: 192.

A Bison "Family"

This drawing depicts a "family" of buffalo. It shows a male (the largest of the three), a female, and a calf. Female bison do not breed until they are three years old. The breeding season for bison is from the first of July to the first of October. Calves are usually born in April, May, and June. Bison cows usually bear only one calf per birth, but twins have sometimes been born. Calves stay with their mothers until they are about one year old. The mid-size bison in the photo is a yearling (that is, it is one year old).



From photograph of group in National Museum.

Engraved by E. M. Coxson.

BUFFALO COW, CALF (FOUR MONTHS OLD), AND YEARLING.
Reproduced from the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, by permission of the publishers.

Bison Family

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory, Evolution of the Conservation Movement (Hornaday)

More About This Topic

Bison live in bands made up of biologically related animals. Females usually live with the band for as long as they live. Young males, however, are usually forced away from the band when they are one year old. The bands follow the lead of the dominant bison bull. Depending upon the season and weather, each band moved as a group trying to find enough grass and water. At other times, many bands came together to become herds of many thousands of bison.

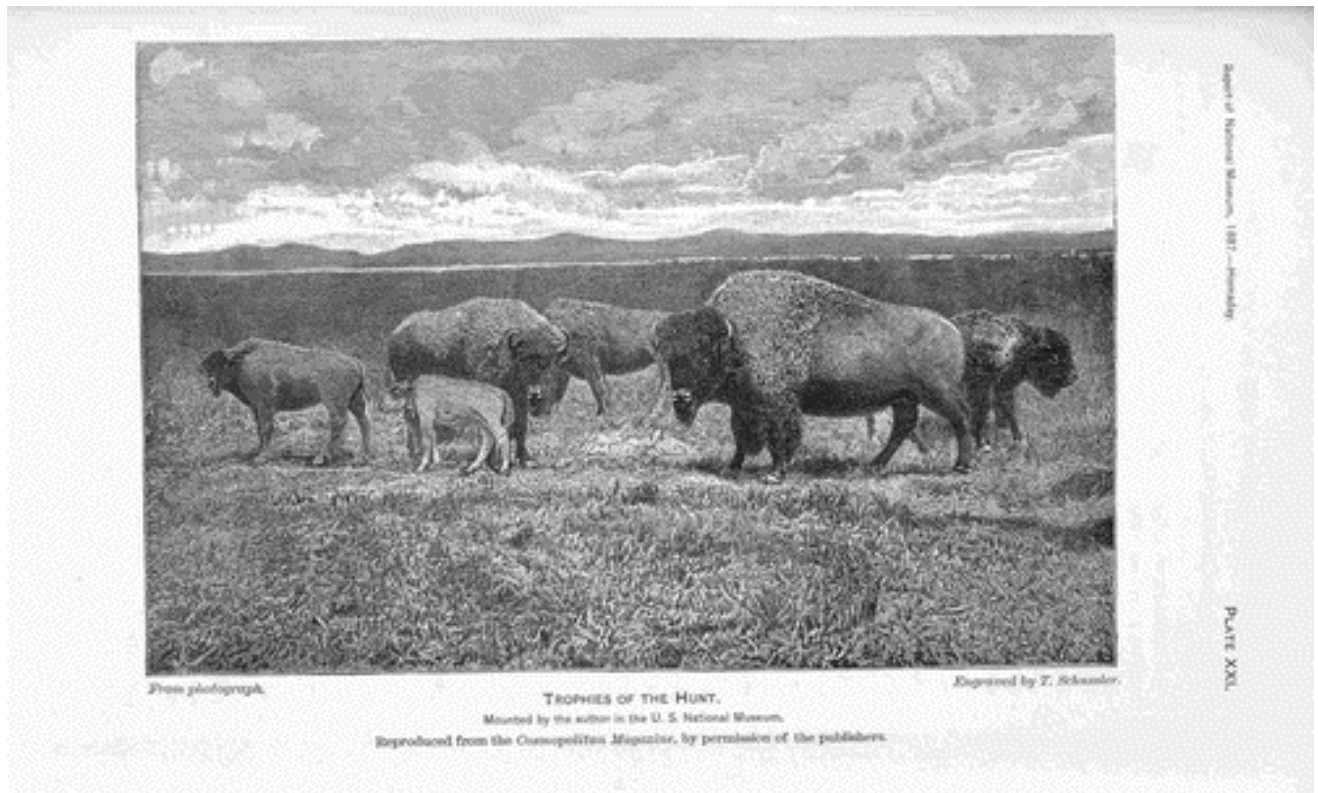
Their Own Words

"The [buffalo] cow seems to possess scarcely a trace of maternal instinct, and when frightened, will abandon and run away from her calf without the slightest hesitation. . . . When the calves are young they are always kept in the center of each small herd, while the bulls dispose themselves on the outside."

Source: Richard I. Dodge. (1871). The Plains of the Great West. : 124; 125.

A Band Of Bison

This drawing depicts a small band of bison. For a long time, naturalists thought that bison migrated in large herds. They also thought that these migrations followed definite seasonal patterns. Their theory was that buffalo moved south for milder weather in winter; they then moved toward the north in spring and early summer. Scientists now believe that bison migrations were largely random movements of small bands. Essentially, bison spent most of their time chasing grass, their main food supply.



Band of Bison

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory, Evolution of the Conservation Movement (Hornaday)

More About This Topic

During mild winters, bison remained on the central and northern plains. In more severe winters, bison did one of two things. They would seek milder weather to the south, or they would seek shelter along plains waterways. In early spring, bison would feed on the grasses along the region's streams. These grasses were the first to sprout in spring. In early summer, bison would move away from the streams toward the highlands where the grasses sprouted later. In summer, these places had abundant and very nutritious buffalo grass.

Their Own Words

"Early in spring, as soon as the dry and apparently desert prairie had begun to change its coat of dingy brown to one of palest green, the horizon would begin to be dotted with buffalo, single or in groups of two or three, forerunners of the coming herd. Thicker and thicker and in larger groups they come, until by the time the grass is well up the whole vast landscape appears a mass of buffalo, some individuals feeding, others standing, others lying down, but the herd moving slowly . . ."

Source: Richard I Dodge. (1871). Our Wild Indians: Thirty-three Years' Personal Experience Among the Red Men of the Great West. Hartford: Worthington, 1883: 283.

A Herd Of Buffalo

This photograph shows a small herd of bison on the plains in the late 1800s. Indian tribes such as Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Sioux decided to move to the plains in part because of the vast herds of buffalo that lived there. Even though the buffalo became the Indians' "walking grocery store," the number of Indians was small and the number of buffalo was huge. So when Euro-Americans began to enter the plains, vast herds of buffalo still lived there. In the next 50 or 60 years, however, these vast herds were disappearing.



Herd of Buffalo

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory, Edward Curtis Photographs

More About This Topic

Because the disappearance of buffalo coincided with the appearance of Euro-Americans on the plains, many people assumed that one thing caused the other. That is, many thought that white hunters caused the near-extinction of the buffalo. Scholars now think the story is much more complicated. There is no doubt that white hunters killed millions of bison in the 1860s and 1870s. But the decline in the buffalo population began long before this time.

Their Own Words

"We were now, day after day, passing through countless herds of buffalo. I could scarcely form an estimate of the numbers within the range of sight at the same instant, but some idea may be formed of them by mentioning, that one day, passing along a ridge of upland prairie at least thirty miles in length, and from which a view extended about eight miles on each side of a slightly rolling plain, not a patch of grass ten yards square could be seen, so dense was the living mass that covered the country in every direction."

Source: George F Ruxton. (1848) Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tale of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War. Horace Kephart. Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1924: 248-249.

Hunting On The Plains

This painting shows a white hunter chasing a buffalo. White hunters had a big impact on the decline in the number of bison on the plains. But the impact of whites on the bison was more complicated than this. For one thing, whites traded manufactured goods to the Indians for buffalo robes. The Indians were good hunters and they traded buffalo robes for guns, ammunition, knives and other utensils, blankets, and many other things. Indians liked these goods, so they began producing thousands of buffalo robes so they could trade for them.



Hunting on the Plains

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory, Evolution of the Conservation Movement (Currier & Ives, 1871)

More About This Topic

Another important factor was the effect of whites on the bison's environment. For one thing, whites' livestock (oxen, cattle, and mules) carried diseases that began to kill bison. For another, white travelers had a big impact on an important bison "micro-environment." That micro-environment was along the streams and rivers of the plains. On the arid plains, these small environments were very important for both Indians and animals. It was along streams and rivers where the first grasses sprouted in spring. It was along these bodies of water that whites traveled as they crossed the plains. The whites' horses, mules, and oxen ate much of the grass in these areas.

Their Own Words

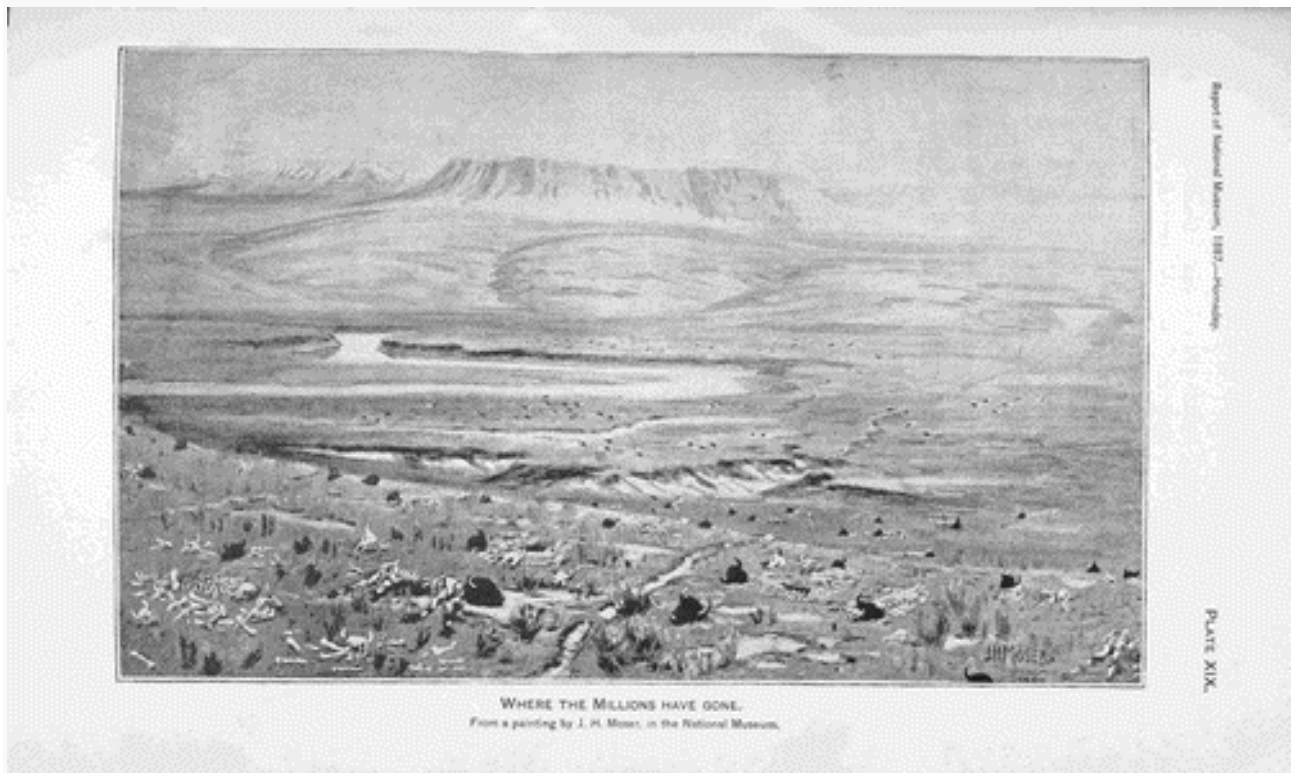
"Some idea of the [vast] slaughter of these animals may be formed, by mentioning the fact that upwards of one hundred thousand buffalo robes find their way annually into the United States and Canada; and these are the skins of cows alone, the bull's hide being so thick that it is never dressed. Besides this, the Indians kill a certain number for their own use, excluding those whose meat they require; and the

reckless slaughter of buffalo by parties of white men, emigrants to the Columbia, California, and elsewhere, leaving, as they proceed on their journey, thousands of untouched carcasses on the trail, swells the aggregate of this wholesale destruction to an enormous amount."

Source: George F. Ruxton. (1848). Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tale of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War. Horace Kephart. Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1924: 197.

Where The Millions Have Gone

This drawing, titled "Where the Millions Have Gone," depicts what had happened to the vast buffalo herds by the end of the 1800s. Hunting, trade, diseases, and environmental change all had negative effects on the plains bison population. Both whites and Indians recognized that the bison were disappearing already in the late 1840s and 1850s. These problems became even worse in the 1860s and 1870s.



Where the Millions Have Gone

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory, Evolution of the Conservation Movement (Hornaday)

More About This Topic

By the mid-1880s, only a handful of buffalo survived. The impact was much greater on plains Indians than on any other human group. As the bison declined in numbers, the Indians who had depended on the bison for most of their needs (whether through trade or direct use) became more and more dependent on the federal government for food and clothing.

Their Own Words

"Notwithstanding the great and wanton destruction of the buffalo, many years must elapse before this lordly animal become extinct. In spite of their numerous enemies, they still exist in countless numbers, and, could any steps be taken to protect them, as is done in respect of other game, they would ever remain the life and ornament of the boundless prairies, and afford ample and never-failing provision to the travelers over these otherwise desert plains."

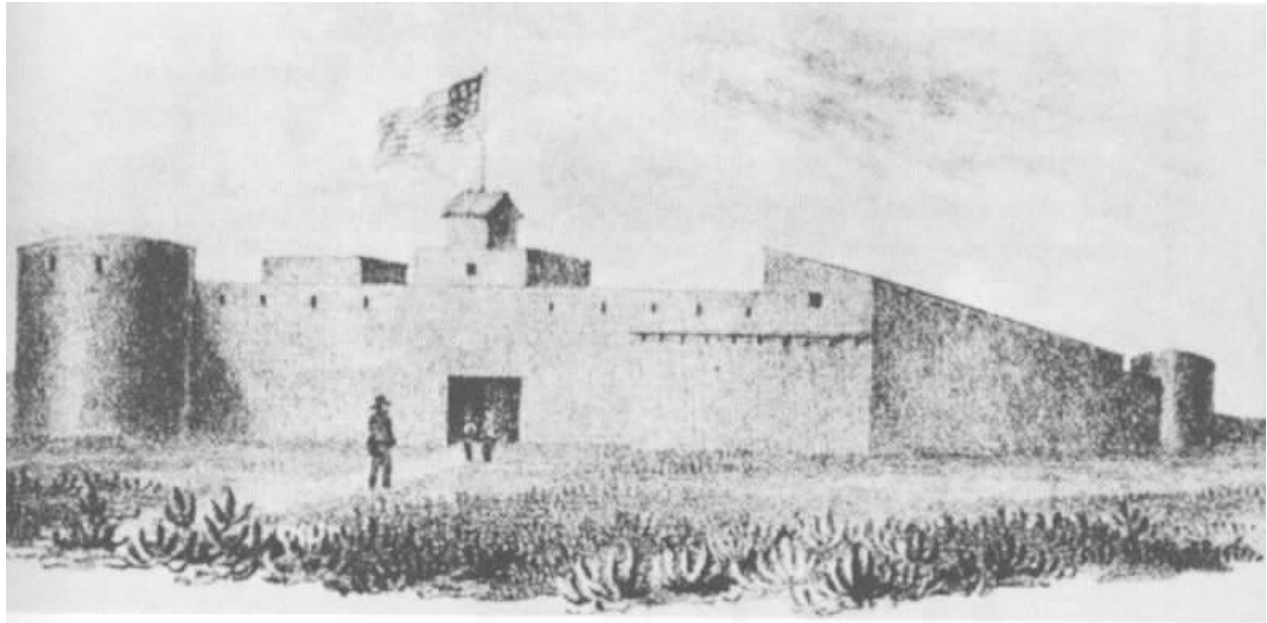
Source: George F. Ruxton. (1848). Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tale of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War. Horace Kephart. Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1924: 197.

Bent's Fort

Bent's Fort became an important trading center in southern Colorado. The Bents completed the original adobe fort in 1835.

Origins Of Bent's Fort

Lieutenant J. W. Abert made this drawing of Bent's Fort in 1845. However, the Bents had been trading and trapping in the region for years before they built their fort. Charles Bent entered the fur trade in about 1816. He worked for the American Fur Company on the upper Missouri River. This area is in present-day Wyoming and Montana. Several years later, his brother William joined him in that work. In about 1824, the Bent brothers met Ceran St. Vrain, another young trapper. They became friends. The three decided to form the own fur trapping company. Before long, they came to the area that is now Colorado. They built a stockade near where Pueblo is now located.



Lieutenant J. W. Abert's Perspective of Bent's Fort, 1845.

Bent's Fort

Photo: Lieutenant J. W. Abert's Drawing of Bent's Fort, 1845

More About This Topic

When the Bents and St. Vrain built their first stockade on the Arkansas River, they were interested in trapping beaver. Meanwhile, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians began moving into this area. In about 1827, the partners built a new stockade on the Arkansas River, but farther downstream. The new stockade was about 75 miles east of their first one. Here they had more contact with the Indian tribes. The partners began to make friends with these tribes.

Their Own Words

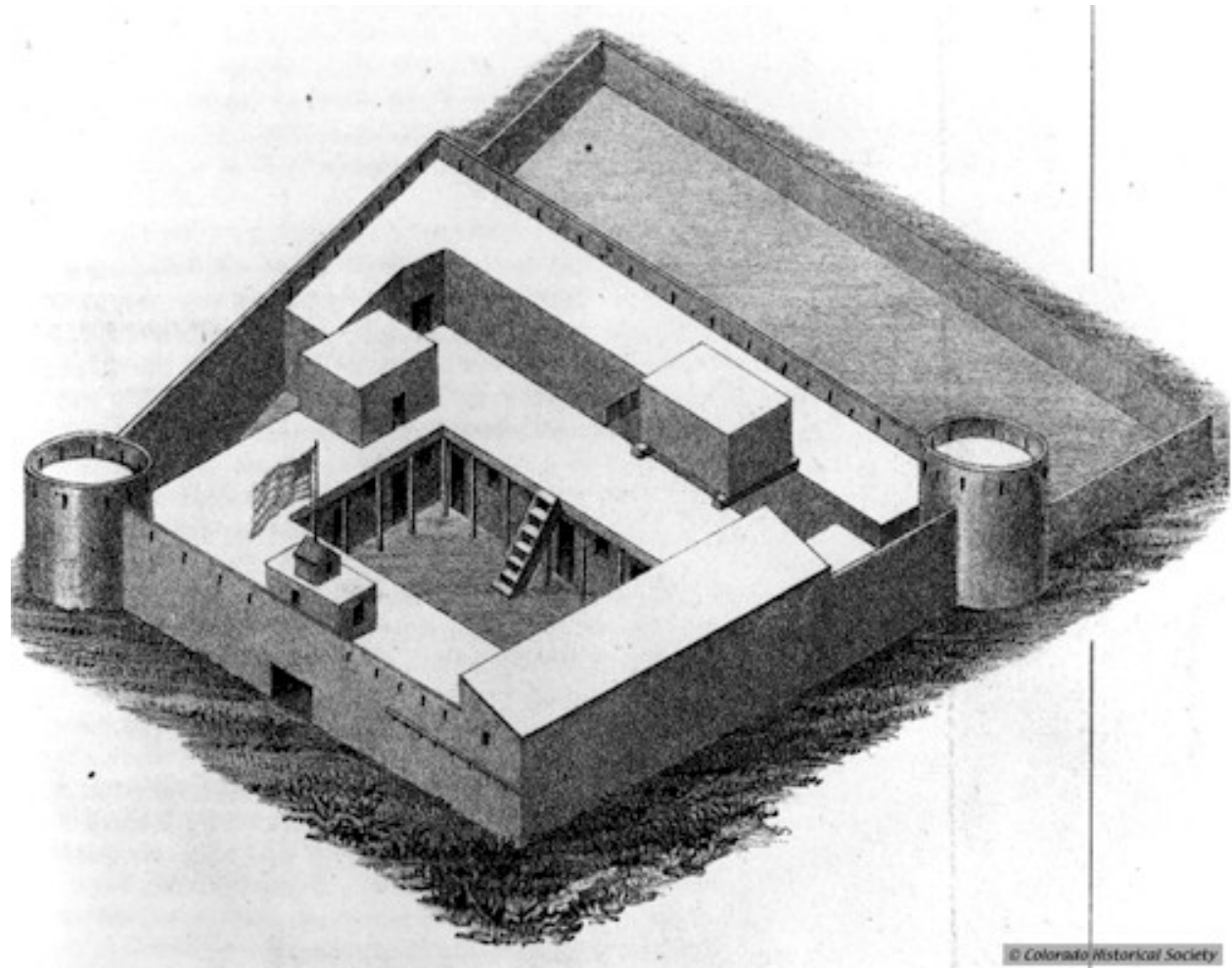
"Fort William, or Bent's Fort, on the north side of the Arkansas, eighty miles north by east from Taos in the Mexican dominions, and about one hundred and sixty miles from the mountains, was erected by gentlemen owners in 1832, for purposes of trade with the Spaniards of Santa Fe and Taos, and the Eutaw, Cheyenne and Cumanche Indians."

Source: Thomas Jefferson Farnham. (1843) Quoted in James H. Maquire, Peter Wild and Donald Barclay. Ed. A Rendezvous Reader. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997: 72.

Building Bent's Fort

In about 1829, the Bents began to replace their stockade with the adobe fort you see in the photo. Charles Bent has been involved in the Santa Fe trade for several years. Having spent time in Santa Fe and Taos, Charles knew the virtues of building with adobe bricks. Adobe dwellings were cool in summer

and warm in winter. They were also fireproof. And in an area short of timber, adobe was a good material with which to build.



Building of Bent's Fort

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

To build the fort, the Bents hired Mexicans who were expert in building with adobe brick. No sooner had the Mexicans arrived from Santa Fe than a smallpox epidemic broke out among them. So many of these workers died from the disease that a new labor force had to be recruited in New Mexico. This episode delayed building the fort. William Bent, Ceran St. Vrain, and the famous scout Kit Carson also caught the disease. Indians who might have visited the Bent stockade were warned off in time to avoid the smallpox.

Their Own Words

"It is in the form of a parallelogram, the northern and southern sides of which are about a hundred and fifty feet, and the eastern and western a hundred feet in length. The walls are six or seven feet in thickness at the base, and seventeen or eighteen feet in height. The fort is entered through a large gateway on the eastern side, in which swing a pair of immense plank doors. At the north-west and south-east corners stand two cylindrical bastions, about ten feet in diameter and thirty feet in height."

Source: Thomas Jefferson Farnham. (1843) Quoted in James H. Maquire, Peter Wild and Donald Barclay. Ed. A Rendezvous Reader. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997: 72.

Diagram Of Bent's Fort

The diagram shows that Bent's Fort was built for defensive purposes. Although the Bents were on friendly terms with most of the Indian tribes in the region, they could take no chances. In fact, many of the Indian tribes in the region were often at war with one another, and sometimes the Bents were caught in the middle. When Matthew Field visited Bent's Fort in 1840, he said that "although built of the simple prairie soil, made to hold together by a rude mixture with straw and the plain grass itself . . . [the fort] is constructed with all the defensive capacities of a complete fortification."

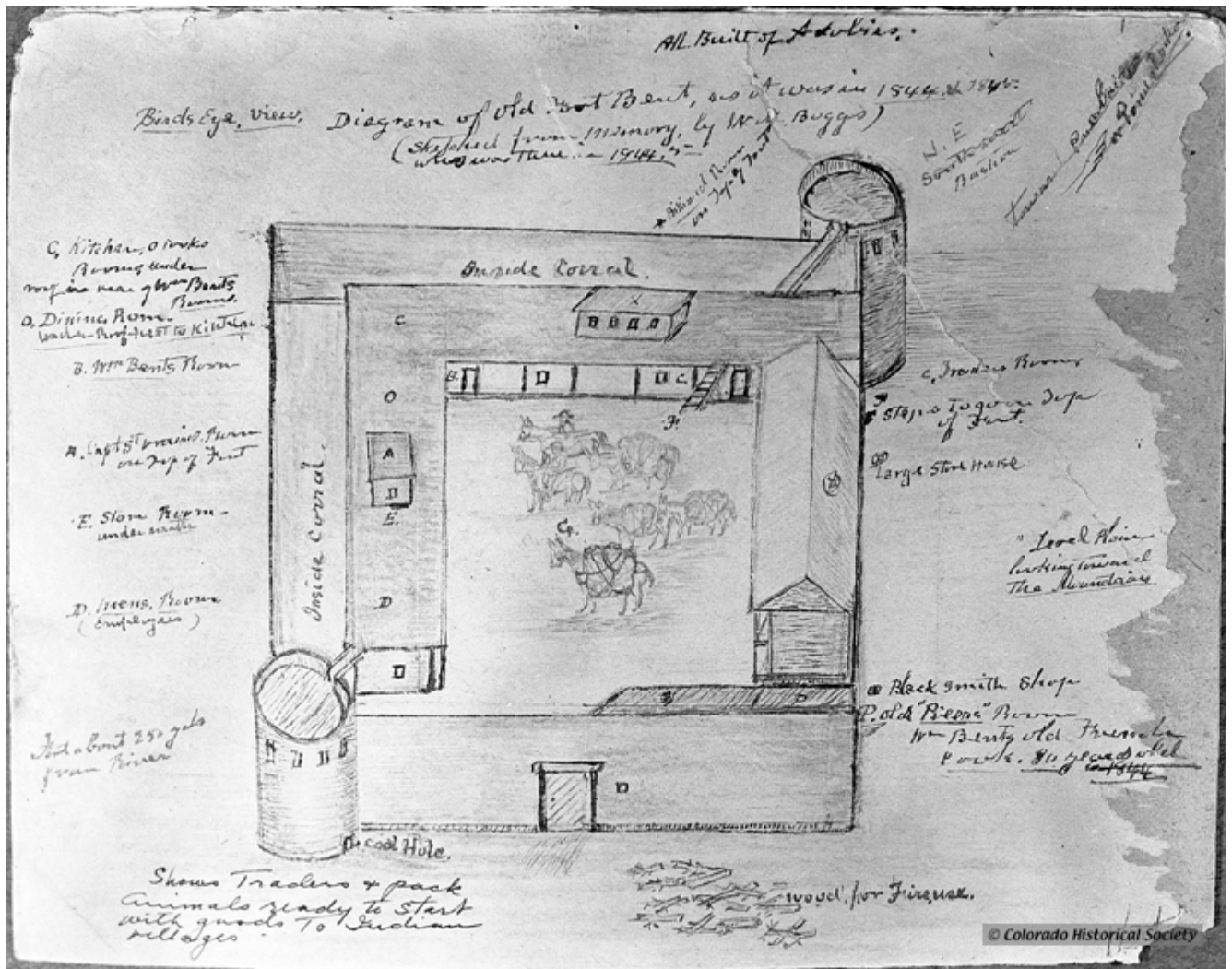


Diagram of Bent's Fort

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Matthew Field noted that "the dwellings, the kitchens, the arrangements for comfort are all such as to strike the wanderer with the liveliest surprise, as though an 'air-built castle' had dropped to earth before him in the midst of the vast desert." The diagram shows that the fort contained within its walls everything necessary to the Bent's business. It had several store rooms, a trade room, a carpenter shop, a blacksmith shop, and several kitchens. In addition, most of the people in the Bent's employ lived within the confines of the fort.

Their Own Words

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Source: Thomas Jefferson Farnham (1843) Quoted in James H. Maguire, Peter Wild, and Donald A Barclay. Ed. A Rendezvous Reader. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1997: 72.

The Bent's Indian Trade

The map shows most of the Indian tribes with whom the Bents traded. Local Indians were only one part of the Bent's three-cornered trade network. One corner was Missouri, where the Bents bought manufactured goods. A second corner was New Mexico, where they got such goods as mules, horses, blankets, and silver. A third corner was the Bent's trade with the Indians. This trade was based on exchanging Indians' buffalo robes and meat and horses for manufactured goods of various kinds. The Bents worked hard at maintaining good relations with Indian tribes. The Indian trade was a very important part of their business.



Bent's Indian Trade

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The Bents traded with most of the Indian tribes in the region. These tribes included Cheyenne, Arapaho, Ute, Kiowa, Comanche, and Northern Apache. The Indians often came to the fort to trade their robes and horses for guns, powder, knives, blankets, tools, and other manufactured goods. Almost as often, traders from the fort went out to the Indians' camps to trade. Sometimes these trading relations were upset when one Indian tribe went to war with another one. The Bents and their traders had to be very careful. They tried to remain neutral when these hostilities broke out.

Their Own Words

"Bent's Old Fort was completed in 1832, and from that time my father lived there and was in command of the post most of the time. About 1835 he married my mother Owl Woman . . . and thus became a member of the Cheyenne tribe. Part of the Cheyenne and Arapahos moved down from the Platte [River] to live near the Arkansas [River], and there bands wintered each year at the Big Timbers, thirty-five miles below the fort. They often camped for long periods right around the fort, coming in every day to trade."

Source: George Hyde. Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters. Savoie Lottinville. Ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968: 68.

The Bent's Missouri Trade

The photo to the right shows a wagon train traveling over the plains. Every spring the Bent & St. Vrain Company sent a wagon train down the Santa Fe Trail. They usually ended their journey at a place called Westport (now Kansas City, Missouri). The wagons carried furs, buffalo robes, and silver. The wagon train also took herds of horses, mules, and cattle. The company had traded for these things during the fall and winter. On their return trip, the wagons carried manufactured goods that the company would use to trade for furs, robes, and the other items.



Bent's Missouri Trade

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

It was 530 miles from Bent's Fort to Westport, Missouri. Between the two places there was no settlement, trading post, or even government fort. Usually six yokes of oxen pulled the big wagons. Often the train consisted of 25 to 30 wagons. At night the wagons were put in a tight circle. The oxen were turned loose inside the corral to eat grass. In the mornings, the train usually started before breakfast. Then at 10:00 o'clock, the train stopped and the traders cooked breakfast. At about 2:00 o'clock, the train started again and usually did not stop until dark.

Their Own Words

"The distance [the wagon train] made each day was not fixed, sometimes a long move was made, and again only a short one. The wagon boss knew all of the best camping places along the five hundred miles of trail, and he regulated the train's movements so as to reach a good camping place with good wood, water, and grass each evening. A hunter was always taken along to provide the outfit with fresh meat, and as the greater part of the march was right through the heart of the buffalo range, meat was usually supplied in abundance."

Source: George Hyde. Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters. Savoie Lottinville. Ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968: 70-71.

The Bent's Mexican Trade

This drawing shows a wagon train entering Santa Fe in the late 1830s. One of the Bent brothers, Charles, made his first trading journey to Santa Fe in 1829. He made several trips over the Santa Fe Trail in the next few years. Bent was sharp at business and he saw great opportunities in the Mexican trade. In fact, it was the Santa Fe trade that originally led Charles and Ceran St. Vrain to become partners. St. Vrain eventually became a Mexican citizen to help with the partnership's trading there.



Bent's Mexican Trade

Photo: Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, 1844

More About This Topic

As Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain were getting established in business in [New] Mexico, William had begun to trade with Indians on the plains north of the Arkansas River. It was Charles, however, who imagined how this trade on the plains might be expanded. It was Charles who imagined the need for a sturdy fort to begin trading in earnest on the plains. And it was Charles who, after living in Mexico, had the idea to build their trading post of adobe brick. Finally, it was Charles who saw how the Indian, Mexican, and Missouri trade might mesh together.

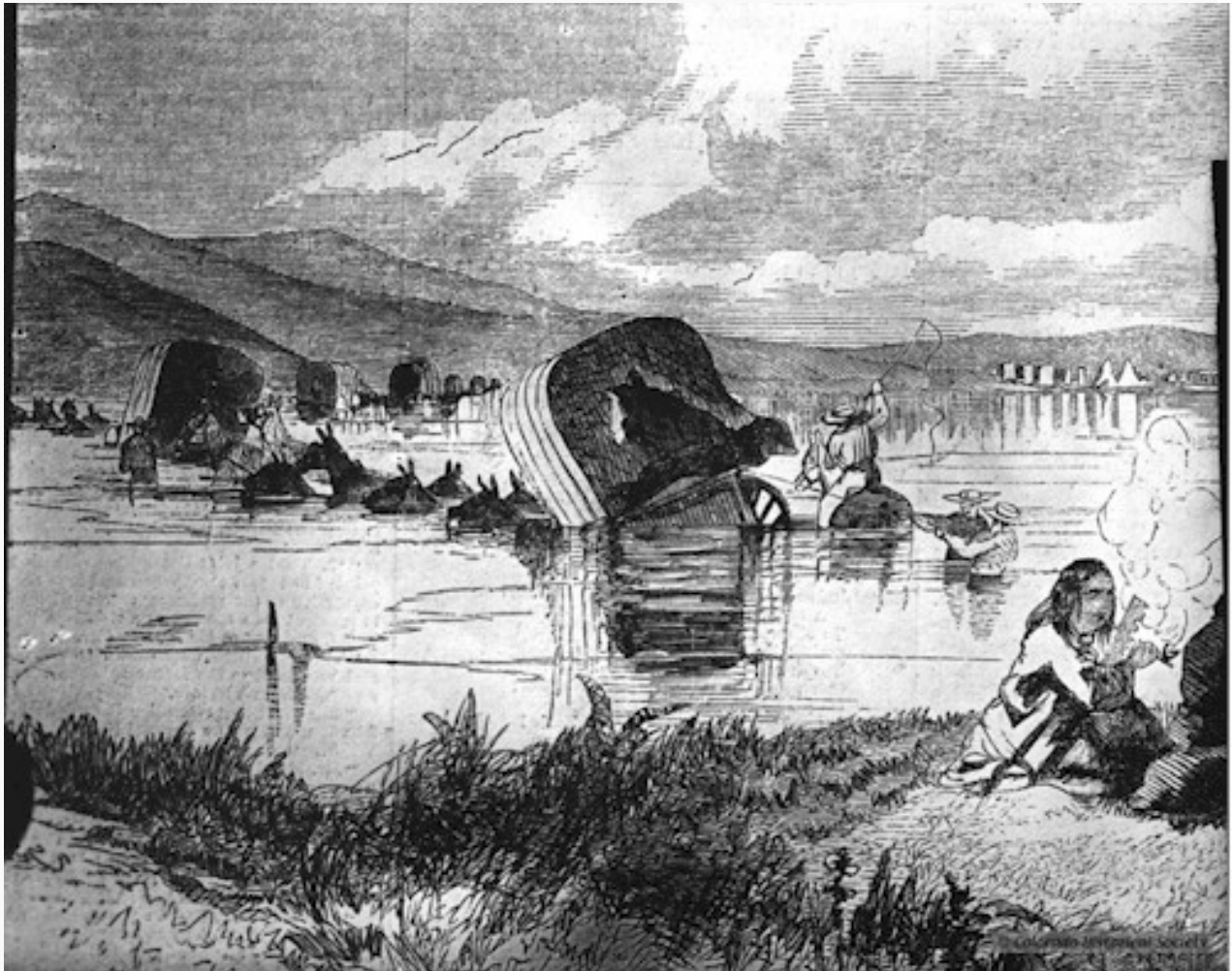
Their Own Words

"Besides trading with the Indians, my father used to send some of his best traders down to New Mexico--to Santa Fe and Taos--with wagonloads of goods from the fort. They brought back from New Mexico horses, mules, cattle, Mexican blankets, silver dollars, and silver bullion in bars. I remember when a boy seeing the wagons come in with their loads of bright colored blankets. The Indians prized these blankets with their stripes of bright coloring very highly, and a good blanket was traded at the fort for ten buffalo robes. The silver, horses, mules, and cattle, were taken to Missouri and sold."

Source: George Hyde. Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters. Savoie Lottinville. Ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968: 69.

The Bent's Adobe Empire

The drawing depicts a wagon train of white settlers crossing the Platte River. Although Bent's Fort became the center of the company's activities, the partners began trading with the wagon trains heading for Oregon. They also opened a new trading post near where the St. Vrain River enters into the Platte River. This post was to trade with the Sioux, the Northern Cheyenne, and Northern Arapaho. They also opened a fort in what is now New Mexico. This trading post was on the Canadian River. Here they traded with such southern Indian tribes as the Kiowa and Comanche.



Bent's Adobe Empire

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Sometimes the Bent, St. Vrain & Company's business grew in unexpected ways. For example, when the partners opened Bent's Fort, there was little American migration across the plains. By the late 1840s, however, large numbers of emigrants (white settlers) were beginning to travel west. The Platte River Valley became their major route west. This route became known as the Oregon Trail. Bent traders took goods, especially horses and mules, north from the fort to trade with these travelers.

Their Own Words

"Other tribes also came to the fort to trade, but as the Cheyennes were at war with the Kiowas, Comanches, and Prairie Apaches, these three tribes could not come to the fort and traders had to be sent to the different camps. In later years two branch forts were established by the Bent and St. Vrain Company: Ft. St. Vrain on the Platte [River], opposite the mouth of St. Vrain's [River], for the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho trade, and Adobe Fort on the Canadian [River, in New Mexico] for the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache trade. These two forts, like Bent's Fort, were built of adobe."

Source: George Hyde. Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters. Savoie Lottinville. Ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968: 68.

End Of The Bent's Trading Empire

The photo to the right shows the ruins of Bent's Old Fort. According to Savoie Lottinville, William Bent blew up the fort in August 1849. One reason for blowing up the fort, according to Lottinville, was that a cholera epidemic brought disaster to the Indians who often traded at the post. There were other reasons as well. The recently ended Mexican War changed everything for people living on the plains. Now there were many more army troops on the plains and the Indians avoided them when possible. By this time, too, the fur trade was dead.



End of Bent's Trading Empire

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

After the Mexican War (which ended in 1848), the War Department offered to buy Bent's Fort. William Bent seemed willing to sell it. However, the government offered only \$12,000, which William did not think a fair price. The Bents abandoned the fort and William blew it up. The old fort was not completely destroyed as you can see in the photo to the right. In time, people realized the significance of the fort and efforts were made to reconstruct the fort.

Their Own Words

"After the Mexican War the fur business had fallen off to such an extent that it was no longer profitable to maintain large trading posts, so when the War Department offered to buy Bent's Fort and turn it into a military post, my father said that he was willing to sell. The government, however, offered him only \$12,000, and . . . he refused to sell, abandoned the fort and blew it into the air."

Source: George Hyde. Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters. Savoie Lottinville. Ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968: 93.

The Santa Fe Trail

Traders and merchants in the area around St. Louis had been interested in trading with Santa Fe for years. The major problem was that the Spanish officials governing Santa Fe did not like the idea. Then in 1821, the Mexican people secured their independence from Spanish authorities. At first, the Mexican authorities who replaced the Spanish in Santa Fe resisted trading with the Americans. For one thing, the Mexican authorities imposed taxes on American goods.

Even so, American traders soon began sending wagons full of goods to trade in Santa Fe. In exchange, the Americans traded for silver, furs and hides, and mules and horses, among other things. Before long, a very extensive trade developed between St. Louis and Santa Fe.

St. Louis

This map shows the city of St. Louis in the early 1850s. After President Thomas Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, St. Louis became important as a trading center. Merchants in St. Louis began an important fur trade with Indians along the Missouri River. Before long, St. Louis merchants also became interested in Santa Fe. These merchants thought Santa Fe might become a large market for their goods and, perhaps, a rich source of gold and silver. However, Santa Fe was in Mexico which was then controlled by Spain. Then in 1821, Mexican nationalists declared their independence from Spain. This opened the door for trade with the Americans.



St. Louis

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory Collections, Panoramic Maps

More About This Topic

As news of the revolution in Mexico came back to Missouri, several trading parties set out for Santa Fe. William Becknell's party was the first to arrive in Santa Fe, in November, 1821. Becknell made three contributions to the Santa Fe trade. First, he found a workable trail (although Indians and Spanish had been using these pathways for years). Second, he received permission from Mexican authorities to trade in Santa Fe. Third, he made a lot of money. Encouraged by these things, Becknell took another trading party to Santa Fe in 1822. Many other would-be Santa Fe traders followed Becknell's path.

Their Own Words

"Last spring, 1846, was a busy season in the city of St. Louis. Not only were emigrants from every part of the country preparing for the journey to Oregon and California, but an unusual number of traders were making ready their wagons and outfits for Santa Fe. The hotels were crowded, and the gunsmiths and saddlers were kept constantly at work in providing arms and equipments for the different parties of travelers. Steamboats were leaving the levee and passing up the Missouri [River], crowded with passengers on their way to the frontier."

Source: Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail, 1849. Reprint of 1892 edition, E. N. Feltskog, ed., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 1.

Outfitting The Wagon Trains

This photograph shows a so-called "bull" train. It was called that because oxen pulled the wagons. These wagons were like those outfitted in western Missouri for trading with Santa Fe. Between 1820 and 1850, several towns in central, and then western, Missouri became centers for outfitting trade wagons bound for Santa Fe. These towns included Franklin, Westport, St. Joseph, and Independence. In the 1820s, Franklin was the first center of trade between Missouri and Santa Fe. By the 1830s, however, Independence became the favorite jumping off place for people traveling to Santa Fe.



Wagon Trains

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Caravans of trade wagons bound for Santa Fe formed about the first of May each year. Local artisans made and repaired wagons and merchants sold provisions and trade goods to the travelers. Horses and mules--and eventually oxen--were the most important items for travelers. Since wagons bound for Santa Fe were fully packed with goods, the wagons were very heavy. The animals pulling the wagons were critical to the success of the traders.

Their Own Words

"It is to this beautiful spot [Independence], already grown into a thriving town, that the prairie adventurer, whether in search of wealth, health, or amusement, [comes] about the first of May, as the caravans usually set out some time during that month. Here they purchase their provisions [foods] for the road, and many of their mules, oxen, and even some of their wagons. . . . in short, load all their vehicles, and make their final preparations for a long journey across the prairie wilderness. . . . Besides the Santa Fe caravans, most of the Rocky Mountain traders and trappers, as well as emigrants to Oregon, take this town in their route. During the season of departure, therefore, it is a place of much bustle and active business."

Source: Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies. 1844. Max Moorehead, ed. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1954): 22.

Eastern Kansas

This photo shows a wagon pulled by oxen across an expanse of plains. This scene was probably like many the Santa Fe traders saw on their journey. In many ways, the first hundred miles of the journey to Santa Fe were often difficult. The travelers and their work animals had to be "seasoned" to the journey. Both had to become accustomed to a new environment. In this first hundred miles, the familiar woodlands of the East and Midwest ended as the travelers entered the seemingly flat, tall-grass prairie. Many travelers saw this change as a dividing line between the civilization they left and the wilderness they were entering. In addition, the travelers were learning how to ford streams, endure heavy spring rains and mud, and care for their animals.



Eastern Kansas

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Council Grove was a favorite stopping point on the trail to Santa Fe. It was about 150 miles from Independence. It got its name from an 1825 parley between the Osage Indians and a team sent by the U.S. government to survey and mark the trail. For later travelers, Council Grove was the last place on the trail where they could harvest hardwood trees for wagon parts. Since Indians in this region were no longer seen as a menace to travelers, many individuals and small groups met here to form larger companies of wagons. Many wagon companies actually organized themselves here, electing their leaders for the rest of their journey.

Their Own Words

"Our pack-saddles being, therefore, girded upon the animals, our sacks or provision, &c., snugly lashed upon them, and protected from the rain that had begun to fall, and ourselves well mounted and armed, we took the road that leads off southwest from Independence in the direction of Santa Fe. . . . We crossed the stream called Bigblue, a tributary of the Missouri, about 12 o'clock, and approached the border of the Indian domains. All were anxious now to see and linger over every object that reminded us that we were still on the confines of . . . civilization. It was, therefore, painful to approach the last frontier enclosure--the last habitation of the white man--the last semblance of home. . . . Before us were the treeless plains of green . . . [which] had been . . . the theatre of the Indians prowess--of their hopes, joys, and sorrows."

Source: Thomas J. Farnham. 1841. Travels in the Great Western Prairies. (Poughkeepsie, NY: Killey and Lossing): 12.

Entering The Great Plains

This photo shows wagons, two-abreast, traveling over the plains. After resting at Council Grove, travelers soon found themselves in increasingly arid [dry] country. They usually camped near small creek or springs when they could. Many of the travelers described these places as oases in the desert, even though worse was yet to come. At this time, most Americans thought of the plains as "the great American desert." Travelers also noticed that the grasses were different from those they knew about in the east. And they noticed that there were few shrubs or trees, except for a few cottonwood trees along some of the rivers and streams.



Entering the Great Plains

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Depending upon the time of year for travel, the creeks could be difficult barriers for their wagons to cross. Rainstorms and swollen streams were problems for travelers as they moved out on the usually dry plains. This, of course, depended on the time of year in which the journey took place. But since it was common to travel over the plains during the late spring and summer, these weather conditions posed problems. Some of the smaller creeks had steep banks, which turned to mud when it rained hard. The wagoners often had to use double or triple teams of draft animals to haul the wagons through such streams. This work was very tiring for both humans and animals.

Their Own Words

"We struck camp on the hill. There is a large mound just by us, from the top of which a splendid view is to be had. On one side, to the west, is a wide expanse of Prairie; as far as the eye can reach nothing but a waving sea of tall grass is to be seen. On the other, for miles around are trees and hills. I went up onto it at sunset, and thought I had not seen, ever, a more imposing sight."

Source: Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847. Stella M. Drumm, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982): 17.

Into Buffalo Country

The drawing shows one of the sights "greenhorn" travelers looked forward to seeing--vast herds of buffalo. Most wagon trains also relied on buffalo and other game for food, at least for much of the trip. For travelers in the 1820s and 1830s, however, buffalo was rarely seen until the trains had nearly reached the Arkansas River. From this point on, at least through the 1840s and 1850s, the travelers usually saw great herds of bison. But the bison posed risks as well as a walking "grocery store." Most of the travelers had little experience hunting buffalo and were not very good at it. On the other hand, many wagon trains hired professional hunters to provide food.



Buffalo Country

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory, Congressional Serial Set #1054

More About This Topic

Travelers on the Santa Fe Trail, at almost any time from the 1820s to the 1850s, provide descriptions of themselves or their companions hunting buffalo. Most of those descriptions suggest that the travelers were not very good buffalo hunters. At least that seems to be the case for most besides the professional hunters. Chasing buffalo, whether on foot or horseback, was full of risks. These would-be hunters often got lost; sometimes their horses would break their legs in a prairie dog hole; some encountered Indians. The latter ranged from peaceful and friendly to hostile and dangerous. At certain times of the year, the plains Indians were where the bison were.

Their Own Words

"A few miles beyond a point on the river known as the Caches, and so-called from the fact that a party of traders, having lost their animals, had here cached, or concealed, their packs We were now, day after day, passing through countless herds of buffalo. I could scarcely form an estimate of the numbers within the range of sight at the same instant, but some idea may be formed of them by mentioning, that one day, passing along a ridge of upland prairie at least thirty miles in length, and from which a view extended about eight miles on each side of a slightly rolling plain, not a patch of grass ten yards square could be seen, so dense was the living mass that covered the country in every direction."

Source: George F. Ruxton. 1849. Wild Life in the Far West. edited LeRoy Hafen, ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): 248-249.

Indian Relations

This drawing shows an attack by Indians on a wagon train. During the first twenty years of the Santa Fe trade, however, these events were quite rare. In the early 1840s, Josiah Gregg reported that early traders on the Santa Fe Trail "but seldom experienced any molestations from the Indians." In the first years of the Santa Fe trade, some traders were attacked by Indians. For the most part, however, the traders either escaped the notice of the Indians or the Indians thought these trains too unimportant to bother. Alphonso Wetmore reported in 1831 that not more than ten lives had been lost during the first decade of the Santa Fe trade.



Indian Relations

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Perhaps the most important reason plains Indians left Santa Fe travelers alone in the early years was that they devoted much more time to hunting buffalo than they did to warfare. Hunting buffalo brought great benefits at very little risk. Attacking Santa Fe travelers might bring great rewards (especially the manufactured goods they desired), but the risks were much higher. That was so, in part, because most Santa Fe traders assembled large wagon trains for greater protection. Over time, however, the resource base (bison) of the plains Indians began to decline. Grasses and wood resources along plains waterways also declined as Santa Fe travelers and their stock used up these resources. As the Indians' resource based declined, they turned to trading with, requesting presents from, and attacking the wagon trains.

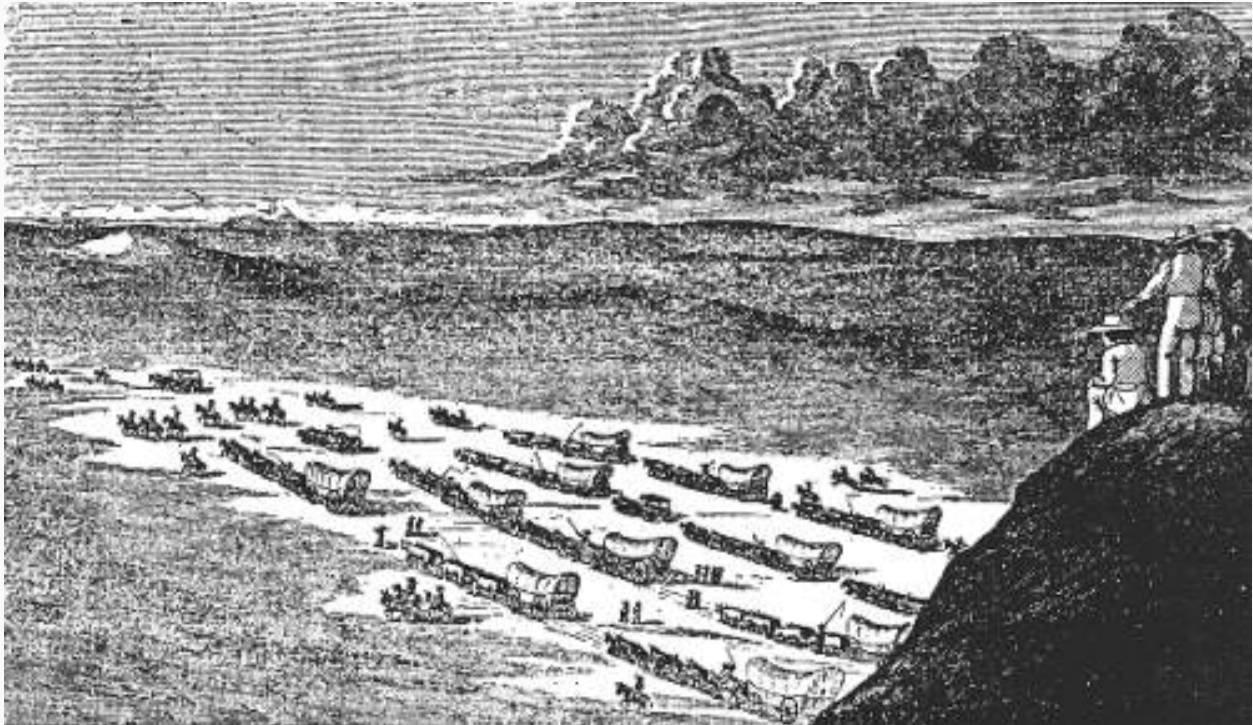
Their Own Words

"Late in the evening of Monday the 24th, we reached the Arkansas, having traveled during the day in sight of buffaloe, which are here innumerable. . . . It is a circumstance of surprise to us that we have seen no Indians, or fresh signs of them, although we have traversed their most frequented hunting grounds; but considering their furtive [secret or sly] habits, and predatory disposition, the absence of their company during our journey, will not be a matter of regret."

Source: William Becknell Diary. 1821. In David White, ed. News of the Plains and Rockies, 1803-1865. (Spokane, WA: Arthur Clarke, 1996): Volume 2, 61-62.

Cimarron River Cut-Off

This drawing shows a wagon train traveling on the Cimarron Cut-off. After traveling along the Arkansas River for a hundred miles or so, travelers had to make a choice of which route they would take to Santa Fe. Most trading companies chose the Cimarron route. This route was about 100 miles shorter than the other route via Bent's Fort and Raton Pass. Travelers had to cross the Arkansas and move south until they met the Cimarron River. Following this river bed put travelers on the south-westerly course which they followed for a while, until they had to strike out across the desert toward Santa Fe.



Cimarron River

Photo: Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies

More About This Topic

The Cimarron cut-off was much more suitable for heavy wagons than the Bent's Fort-Raton Pass route. Even so, wagon trains faced many difficulties moving down this route. The cut-off was also much more dangerous than the alternative. First, it lacked water and forage for livestock to a greater extent than the northern route. Second, the cut-off took travelers through the territory of the Kiowa and Comanche Indians. These groups were almost always more hostile and challenging to American and Mexican intruders on their grounds.

Their Own Words

"After following the Arkansas, about eighty miles, we forded it with our wagons, and took a more southerly course toward the Semaron [Cimarron River] . . . After crossing, we travelled about twelve miles through the sand-hills, and then came into the broad and barren prairie again. The prairie, however, between the Arkansas and Semaron, (a distance, according to our route, of about a hundred miles), was not level, but rather composed of immense undulations . . . a hard, dry surface of fine gravel, incapable, almost, of supporting vegetation. The general features of this whole great desert--its sterility, dryness and unconquerable barrenness--are the same wherever I have been in it."

Source: Albert Pike. 1834. Prose Sketches and Poems. David J. Weber, ed. Albuquerque, NM: Calvin Horn Publisher: 231.

Big Timbers Of The Arkansas

The drawing shows what the "big timbers" of the Arkansas River probably looked like in the early 1800s. Plains Indians survived in winter by breaking up into small bands and retreating to specific kinds of locations within the plains. These places had to have four resources. The Indians needed forage for their horses. They had to have water for themselves and their horses during the driest times of the year (i.e., winter). They had to have fuel and protection from the powerful winds that blew much of the time. These kinds of places were all on plains streams and rivers. Even so, not all sections of every stream or river had all the resources Indians needed. The largest of these places were called "big timbers," and the most famous of these was the "big timbers" of the Arkansas.



Big Timbers of the Arkansas

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The Big Timbers of the Arkansas River was a grove of cottonwood trees stretching down the river each direction from present-day Lamar, Colorado. The Smoky Hill River, near the present-day Kansas-Colorado boundary had the second "big timbers" and the Republican River, near present-day McCook, Nebraska, had the third. There were, of course, other desirable locations along each of these rivers, the South Platte River, and the tributaries of each. Even so, there were not many places with adequate resources on the great plains. One of the problems that emerged over time was that travelers and traders along the Santa Fe Trail (and other trails as well) were using up the resources of these places. They consumed the wood for their own fires, their stock ate the grass, and they often polluted the water.

Their Own Words

"In winter the Plains Indians, who are very susceptible to cold, remain in their teepees nearly all the time, going out only when forced to do so, and getting back as soon as possible to the pleasant warmth of their homes. Their ponies are wretchedly poor, and unable to bear their masters on any extended scout or hunt. . . . A day which would be death on the high Plains may scarcely be uncomfortably cold in a thicket at the bottom of a deep narrow canyon. Indians, plainsmen and all indigenous animals understand this perfectly, and fly to shelter at the first puff [of snow]."

Source: Richard Irving Dodge. 1883. Our Wild Indians: Thirty-Three Years' Personal Experience among the Red Men of the Great West. Hartford, CT: Worthington and Co.: 501.

Bent's Old Fort

This drawing depicts the entrance to Bent's Old Fort. Although the majority of Santa Fe traders chose the Cimarron route to Santa Fe, not all did. After the founding of Bent's Fort in the early 1830s, some travelers and traders followed the Arkansas River upstream to the fort. From there, they turned southward through Raton Pass to the settlements in New Mexico. Many of those who chose this route often had smaller, lighter wagons or traveled via mule pack-trains. Over time, Bent's Fort itself became an important trade destination. Traders brought manufactured goods of various kinds to the fort, which were used in exchange for buffalo robes and beaver pelts brought to the fort by both Indian and white trappers and hunters.



Bent's Old Fort

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Bent's Fort was a center of the Indian trade. Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians, in whose territory the Bent brothers built their fort, formed a very close trading relationship with the Bents. William Bent, the manager of the fort, married Owl Woman, a Cheyenne woman. One result of this union was very friendly relations between these two plains tribes and white travelers and traders. An older brother, Charles, was the driving force of the company. He lived in Taos to look after the company's interests there. Ceran St. Vrain, a partner in the enterprise, also lived in Taos.

Their Own Words

"The fort is a quadrangular structure, formed of adobes, or sun-dried brick. It is thirty feet in height, and one hundred feet square; at the northeast corner, and its corresponding diagonal, are bastions of a hexagonal form, in which are a few cannon. The fort walls serve as the back walls of the rooms, which front inward on a courtyard. In the center of the court is the 'robe press' . . . The roofs of the houses are made of poles and a layer of mud a foot or more thick, with a slight inclination, to run off the water."

Source: Lewis H. Garrard. 1846. Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955): 42-43.

Mountain Raton Route

This is a drawing of the Purgatory River Valley. After stopping at Bent's Fort, travelers bound for the New Mexican settlements still had a ways to go. Most followed a south-westerly course that took them across a desert before they crossed the Purgatory River and followed that stream to the foot of Raton Pass. The Pass itself was full of dangers for the weary travelers. Depending upon the time of year, travelers could experience severe cold and deep snow.



Mountain Raton Route

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Travelers and traders with large, heavy wagons usually avoided the mountain route to Santa Fe. But for those with lighter wagons, the trip over Raton Pass could still be difficult. Depending upon the time of year, forage was often scarce for travelers' livestock. Wood for fuel was almost always scarce. U.S. Army Lieutenant J. W. Abert reported seeing the wreckage of wagons near the crest of Raton Pass.

Their Own Words

"On October 21 [1821] William Becknell's trading party "arrived at the forks of the river [where the Purgatoire flows into the Arkansas River], and took the course of the left hand one. . . . [Farther along] We had now some cliffs to ascend, which presented difficulties almost unsurmountable, and we were laboriously engaged nearly two days in rolling away large rocks, before we attempted to get our horses up, and even then one fell and was bruised to death. At length, we had the gratification of finding ourselves on the open plain; and two days' travel brought us to the Canadian [River] fork, whose rugged cliffs again threatened to interrupt our passage, which we finally effected with considerable difficulty."

Source: William Becknell, in David White, ed., News of the Plains and Rockies, 1803-1865, Vol 2 (Spokane: Arthur Clarke, 1996): 64.

Santa Fe

This drawing was made of Josiah Gregg's wagon train arriving in Santa Fe in the late 1830s. The physical distance between St. Louis and Santa Fe was great. The 750 to 850 miles between the two places traveled by horse, mule, or wagon took two months. If that distance was great, the cultural distance between the American traders and their Mexican hosts and customers was probably even greater. It was not that the two peoples were always at odds. Rather, each group found the other to be different in their habits and customs.



Santa Fe

Photo: Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies (1844).

More About This Topic

After trade between Missouri and Santa Fe began in the 1820s, Americans enjoyed Mexican hospitality and wanted to take advantage of trading opportunities there. Yet they found much to criticize in the habits and customs of the Mexican people. Mostly Protestants, the Americans did not like the power of the Catholic Church. While Mexican officials often greeted them with cordiality, the Americans did not like the power these officials held over the common people. Mexican officials often seemed to be easily changing--sometimes they were cordial; other times they were uncooperative. Not understanding Mexican culture and circumstances, the Americans were often critical of what appeared to be a lack of hard work and industry.

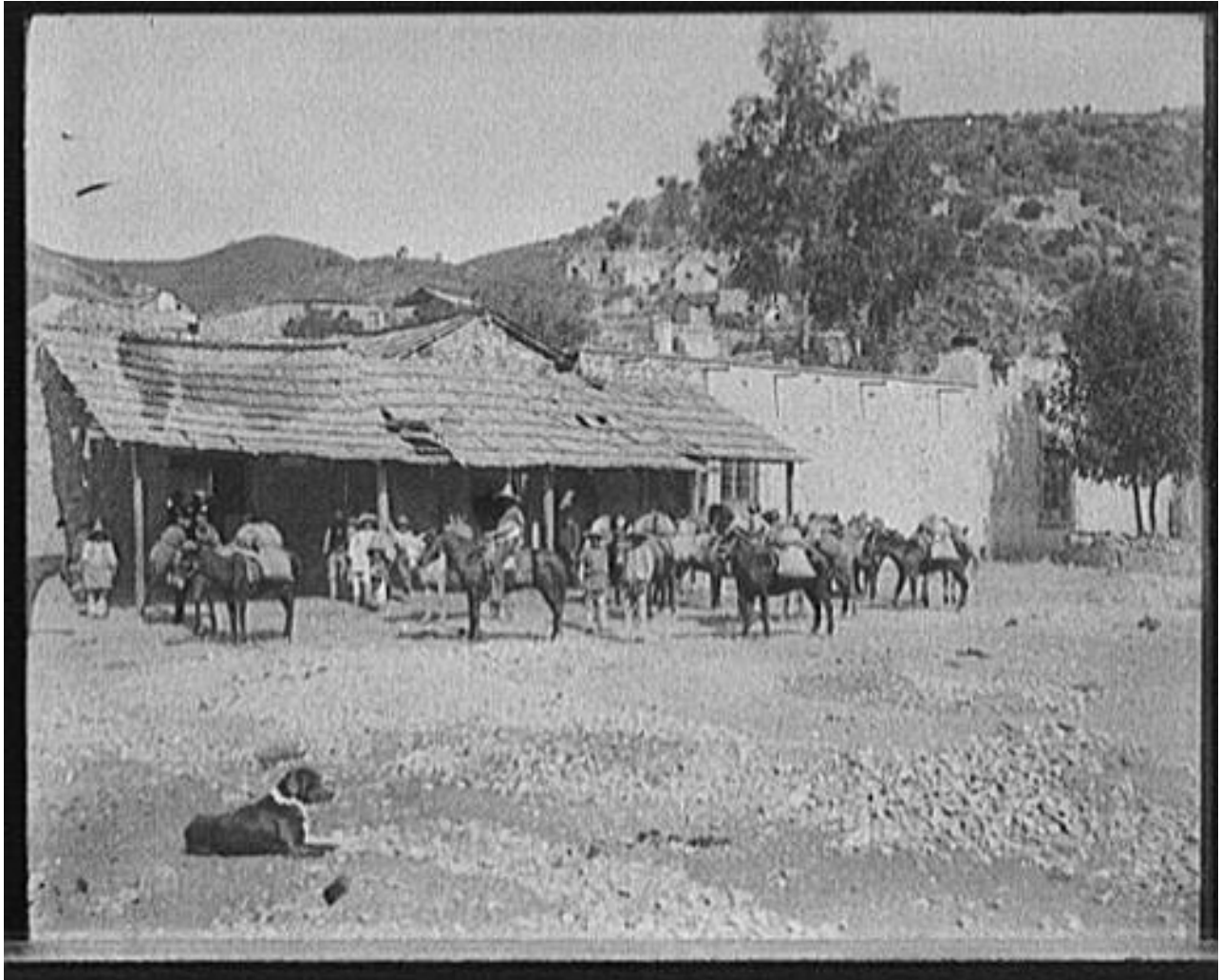
Their Own Words

"The next day, after crossing a mountain country, we arrived at SANTA FE and were received with apparent pleasure and joy. It is situated in a valley of the mountains, on a branch of the Rio del Norte or North River [now called the Rio Grande], and some twenty miles from it. It is the seat of government of the province; is about two miles long and one mile wide, and compactly settled. The day after my arrival I accepted an invitation to visit the Governor, whom I found to be well informed and gentlemanly in manners; his demeanor was courteous and friendly. He asked many question concerning my country, its people, their manner of living, etc. . . ."

Source: William Becknell. 1821. In David White, ed. News of the Plains and the Rockies, 1803-1865. (Spokane, WA: Arthur Clarke, 1996): Volume 2, 65.

Taos Area

This photo shows a burro pack train in Taos, New Mexico. The town of Taos, about eighty miles north of Santa Fe, was not on the Santa Fe Trail. Even so, it became important in the Santa Fe trade. Taos became a center for the so-called southern fur trade. Trappers and hunters who sought beaver pelts and the hides of other animals used Taos as a place to trade their harvests for new supplies. These supplies included foodstuffs, traps, knives, guns, powder, and lead, as well as clothing. These goods were provided largely by Santa Fe traders who, in turn, bought the pelts and hides from the trappers and hunters.



Taos Area

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory Collection

More About This Topic

In the 1840s, the population of the Taos Valley was estimated to be about 8,000 people. According to Frederick Ruxton, the valley was fertile and produced very good wheat and other grains. A number of American traders settled in the valley, many of whom opened distilleries to make whiskey. This beverage was called "Taos Lighting" and was important in the trade with trappers and hunters as well as with the Indians.

Their Own Words

"Directly in front of me, with the dull color of its mud dwellings, contrasting with the dazzling whiteness of the snow, lay the little village, resembling an oriental town, with its low, square, mud-roofed houses and two square church towers, also of mud. On the path to the village were a few Mexicans, wrapped in their striped blankets, and driving their jackasses heavily laden with wood towards the village. Such was the aspect of the place at a distance. On entering it, you found only a few dirty, irregular lanes, and a quantity of mud houses."

Source: Albert Pike. 1834. Prose Sketches and Poems Written in the Western Country. David J. Weber, ed. (Albuquerque, NM: Calvin Horn Publisher, 1967): 146.