

Park County Historical Society presentation season opens with the tale of the Bent family, fur trade tycoons

Link between Bent family, Kit Carson and Salt Works Ranch

Douglas Stephens, Correspondent



President Brown Opens Arms to Attendees

Park County Historical Society President Dee Brown, standing in front of a map of Colorado pre territory status, tells attendees at the Sept. 13 dinner presentation of the vast effect the fur trapping trade had on the formation of the United States of America. (Photo by Douglas Stephens/The Flume)

Saturday, Sept. 13, marked the beginning of the Park County Historical Society's dinner presentation season.

Dee Brown, PCHS president, told the tale of the Bent family, of Bent's Fort fame.

A tradition of trapping was started by the French circa 1500 and continued in the early 1600s with the English along the eastern seaboard.

French trappers worked in what is now Canada and then into French and Spanish territories of North America. They trapped many fur bearing animals including beaver and mink.

This was the background for the Bent Family's trapping and trading.

"The fur trade was the first commercial enterprise that built this country. The area was a supermarket of fur bearing animals," Brown said.

Beaver was trapped for hats which Brown said would retail for \$800. Beaver hides had the outer hair removed leaving the felt. Mercury was used to form the hats. Mercury's poisonous nature was unknown, leading to the expression "mad as a hatter" for the physical effects of mercury poisoning.

Buffalo hides were used for carriage robes and later cut into strips and used for machine drive belts at the start of the industrial revolution.

"Trapping was hard, dangerous work," Brown said. "The Bents, Charles and William, decided that trading would be better work."

There were a lot of mountain men trapping, including Jim Beckworth, Jim Bridger, Jedidiah Smith, John Jacob Astor, and Christopher "Kit" Carson.

Trappers took their beaver and buffalo pelts or plews (from the French pleu) to St. Louis for sale. It took six weeks to travel from Colorado to St. Louis to sell furs.

The Bents wanted to trade as intermediaries under their own company, the Bent St. Vrain Company. William Bent joined with Ceran St. Vrain in what would become Colorado.

At the same time Manuel Lisa trapped in Sante Fe, which was Spanish territory. Charles Bent went to Santa Fe with Lisa to trap and trade. Later Charles Bent was killed when thought to be a traitor to the Spanish.

Bent's first fort

The first fort was only used for a few years.

"Yellow Wolf of the Cheyenne came to Bent's Fort and told William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain of many buffalo north of the fort," Brown said.

Bent and St. Vrain were excited about this as they had plenty of beaver plews coming into the fort but could use more buffalo.

Yellow Wolf proposed to Bent and St. Vrain that they move the fort near the Cheyenne and the buffalo. The Cheyenne would provide the fort buffalo if the Cheyenne got first crack at the trade goods.

The fort was moved along the Arkansas River on the Mountain Branch of the Sante Fe Trail. The location is between La Junta and Las Animas.

"The site is within 30 miles of where Yellow Wolf told them to build," Brown said.

Bent's second fort was built in 1832 and was used for 17 years.