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Life of George Bent
Written from His Letters

By George E. Hyde

Edited by Savoie Lottinville

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Dedicated to My Good Friend

Savoie Lottinville

Who Helped Me Reassemble The Life of George Bent

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Introduction

This book was written fifty years ago from the letters of George Bent to George E. Hyde. The coming of the first World War made it impossible to find a publisher, and the manuscript was put away in a box and forgotten. It turned up in the attic two years ago. Its quality was obvious. The Bent material was well worth publishing, but the manuscript needed work to put it in shape. It was then found that a better manuscript had been acquired by the Denver Public Library, through whose friendly co-operation this copy was made available and has been used in the making of the present version, down to the point where my older and longer working copy extended the chronology.

George Bent was the half-blood son of Colonel William Bent, who, with his brother Charles, owned and operated Bent's Fort on the Upper Arkansas River in southeastern Colorado. Bent's mother was Owl Woman, the daughter of White Thunder, who was keeper of the Medicine Arrows and, in effect, was the high priest of the Southern Cheyennes and in some ways more important than any of the chiefs. He was killed in the battle with the Kiowas at Wolf Creek, in what is now northwestern Oklahoma, in 1838.

The Bent brothers began to trade with the Indians in Dakota in the early 1820's. They then decided to shift their operations to the Upper Arkansas, this river then being the boundary between the United States and Mexico. In 1828 or 1829, the Bent brothers built Bent's Fort on the north side of the Arkansas, near the present town of La

Junta, Bent County, Colorado.¹ The place was a big one, built in the Mexican style with adobe bricks. It had all of the Indian trade from north and south of the Arkansas, and also a big trade with the Mexicans at Taos and Santa Fe. The fort employed from eighty to one hundred men, many Americans but more Mexicans. It was here in the old fort that George Bent and his younger brother, Charles, were born and brought up.

By 1849, the Indian trade and the trade with American beaver trappers was much less profitable. Charles Bent, the elder, was dead, and his brother William blew up the old fort. He built another (smaller one) which was called Bent's New Fort. He sent his two sons, George and Charles, to school in Missouri; and then the gold rush to Colorado filled the country with a rough American population, mainly men, and William Bent sold his fort to the War Department, which renamed it Fort Lyon. Bent established a ranch near the post and lived there. He was for a time agent for the tribes on the Upper Arkansas.

The Civil War now broke out, and George Bent and many of the boys at his academy in Missouri enlisted in the Confederate Army. I do not remember what Charlie Bent did. By the time he had gone through the savage Battle of Pea Ridge, George Bent had had enough of the white man's methods of making war. General Sterling Price's army was breaking up, the men leaving.

George Bent returned to western Missouri, joined a wagon train headed west, and went to his father's ranch near Fort Lyon. His brother Charlie also went there. The white men of Colorado were mainly violent partisans of the Union cause; they termed the Bent boys renegades and threatened to kill them on sight. I believe that William Bent advised the boys to join a camp of their mother's people, the Southern Cheyennes, for safety, and this they did. This

¹ Charles and William Bent were closely associated with Ceran St. Vrain, who, as a member of the firm of Bent, St. Vrain and Company, must also be credited with the creation of Bent's Fort, as will appear in succeeding chapters. The dates for the construction of the fort are given in footnote 7, Chapter 3, *infra*.S.L.

was in 1863, and soon after the Bent brothers joined the Cheyennes a violent Indian war was started in the Plains. The Bents found themselves cut off from the world of white civilization. They became separated, George going north with the main hostile camps, Charlie remaining in the Kansas plains with another camp.

It is for this period of war, from 1863 to 1868, that George Bent's information is unique. He was the only man among the hostiles who could and did set down in writing an account of what he witnessed. He described the war customs of the Plains Indians, as he saw them on this last big occasion when the ancient customs were being kept up. He saw the warriors preparing for battle by "renewing" the magic power of their battle charms and having their war bonnets and war shirts refurbished. He was present at the great war parades in the hostile camps, and went with the big war parties, witnessing how the Indian soldier societies herded the warriors together in a dense column and whipped any men who tried to slip away and make premature attacks of their own which would alert their white enemies and thwart the plans of the Indian leaders.

Bent's account of these war operations is particularly important, as he was the only eye-witness to report on them. Out of touch with white civilization, he did not even know the months in which events occurred; but the years he remembered, and by using the Indian reckoning by moons, he had a good idea as to dates. I have found the true dates in official records and inserted them; I have also inserted the names of military commanders who operated against the Indians, as Bent usually did not know who the commanding officer was or the identity of the troops.

Over the years, I have been asked from time to time by some scholar what I thought of George Bent's reliability as an informant, and I have always said at once that I placed him very highly. The late George Bird Grinnell also had a high opinion of Bent, and usually employed him as an interpreter when he paid his frequent visits to the Cheyennes and Arapahos in Oklahoma seeking material. Bent would get together a number of old Indians and interpret what they said,

and Grinnell's secretary would make a shorthand version of Bent's interpretation.² Grinnell had scores of these interviews carefully typewritten, and also interviews from the Northern Cheyennes, Blackfeet, and Pawnees. He used part of the Bent material in his book, *The Fighting Cheyennes*.

George Bent differed from all the other mixed bloods I ever knew in that he liked to write letters. The other mixed bloods would fail to reply to your inquiry or would write a half-page in faint pencil a year after receiving your letter, and then they gave up. Bent would answer you fully, giving what information he had, and he would then look up some old Cheyenne men and women and write down what they had to tell him. He gave their names, ages, and often their tribal affiliations. It was all obviously reliable material, allowing for the fact that no two human beings ever saw the same events eye to eye.

During the fifty years that have elapsed since George Bent's death, I have picked up much additional information concerning the Indians in the north in early times. It seems to me to be apparent that the old people who talked to Bent around the date 1910 were correct in stating their belief that the Cheyennes were closely related to the Crees. It seems to me that the Cheyennes, Blackfeet, Arapahos, and Atsinas were all part of the mass of Algonquian people who, around the date 1600, were wandering in the cold lands between the north shore of Lake Superior and the James Bay of Hudson Bay. These people had canoes. In winter they could not support themselves in large camps but had to separate into family groups, each family living far from all neighbors in the forest. They were snowed in all winter, living mainly on rabbits and probably hunting on snowshoes.

I think it probable that the Blackfeet and Cheyennes may have been a single group that drifted southward into northern Minnesota sometime near the date 1600. The native names for these two tribes

² Hyde, in response to my inquiry, tells me he was not the secretary in the case, though he was for some time Grinnell's research assistant. That Grinnell, after a growing reluctance on the part of George Bent to interpret for him or supply information, became dependent upon Hyde, whose relations with Bent were excellent, seems probable.S.L.

seem to be the same, allowing for a difference in spelling, the Cheyennes calling themselves *Dzis-dsis-tas*, the Blackfeet calling themselves *Sik-sika*.³ I think that the Arapahos and Atsinas formed a somewhat different group and came down into Minnesota about the time the Cheyennes and Blackfeet did.

In the Headwaters Lakes country, near the head of the Mississippi, these Algonquian Indians from the north encountered Siouan Indians, who were mound builders and had, perhaps, a higher culture than the Algonquians. The map of the mound groups in northern Minnesota seems to show a clear-cut division between the two Indian stocks, the mound groups extending up to the upper Mississippi indicating the Siouan area, the lands farther north, with only a few circular burial mounds, being those occupied by the Algonquians. We have only a dim vision of these early times in Minnesota. The Arapahos remembered that the Blackfeet were there; the Chippewas stated that the Siouans were Hidatsas, or Hidatsas and Crows, and that they were driven to the Missouri by enemies. The names, Upper and Lower Red Lake, Red Lake River, and Red River of the North, were originally Algonquian, and these names do not mean red but mean blood. This hints at early wars or massacres, when the natives armed only with flint weapons were attacked by enemies armed by the French with steel knives and some guns.

The Blackfeet, if they were there, must have left early. They seem to have been in Manitoba Province, Canada, about the date 1690. The Hidatsas, Crows, Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Atsinas perhaps were forced to remove westward, to and beyond Red River. The Cheyennes who talked to George Bent had forgotten all this. They remembered the kind of life they led in Minnesota, near the lakes and marshes, but they had no memory of wars earlier than the Assiniboin and Sioux attacks on them, probably after 1700. Strangely, they did not recall the savage raids made on their people by the Chippewas

³ Frederick Webb Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, 2551, gives the Cheyenne self-designation as *Dzi'tsiistas*, after Petter. Note also slight variation on this same phrase in the opening lines of Chapter 1 which follows.S.L.

after 1700, and they all told Bent that they obtained their first horses out near the Black Hills, after 1775. We know from Chippewa tradition that the Cheyennes in the village on Sheyenne Fork of Red River were mounted in 1750, and I think that archaeology has confirmed this by finding horse bones in the ruins of this village.

The Cheyenne tradition of the removal west to the Missouri seems better than the Arapaho tradition, the Arapahos making their tribe, the Cheyennes, and the Atsinas all migrate in one group towards the Missouri. Our other evidence is that these Indians, and the Hidatsas and Crows, moved to the Missouri in small groups at different periods, and this confirms the Cheyenne stories.

It seems pretty obvious that these migrations westward date after 1700, with the exception of the Blackfeet, who were seemingly in Manitoba by 1690. Joseph La France and the [Pierre Gaultier de Varrenes, Sieur de la] Verendrye journals both mention the tribe called Beaux Hommes as being on Red River of the North as late as about the year 1740; the Beaux Hommes or part of that group were still on Red River of the North, between the Assiniboins in Manitoba and the Sioux on Minnesota River. These Beaux Hommes were either Crows or Hidatsas and Crows, and the Bougainville report of 1757 places them on or west of the Missouri, near the Mandans.⁴

The Bougainville material gives the Algonquian name for the People of the Bow, and this name means Bowstring, not Bow. They were met in the plains west of the Missouri by Verendrye's sons in 1742, and the name suggests that they may have been the Cheyenne camp in which the famous Bowstring warriors were prominent. Here we have another dim clue to the early history of the Cheyennes; for in northern Minnesota, north of the upper Mississippi, there is a Bowstring River, and this may indicate the early location of Cheyenne groups. It would fit in with the Cheyenne traditions of the early period when they lived in Minnesota among lakes and marshes.

Returning up the Missouri from the Arikara villages to those of

⁴ For Beaux Hommes, see Louis Antoine de Bougainville, *Adventure in the Wilderness: The American Journals of Louis Antoine de Bougainville*, translated and edited by Edward P. Hamilton, 117, 120, 148.S.L.

the Mandans in the early months of 1743, Verendrye's sons passed a camp of Indians they thought were Sioux; but they gave the name of the group as People of the Painted or Striped Arrows, and here we may have a reference to the second Cheyenne group, the one that had the medicine arrows. Moreover, they seem to have been met in the neighborhood where the Cheyennes later had two earth-lodge villages, just below the later Fort Yates on the west bank of the Missouri, and this suggests that the medicine-arrow camp was part of the earth-lodge Cheyenne group.

I do not know what became of the large number of letters that George Bent wrote to Mr. Butler of Washington, D.C. It is to be hoped that they will turn up and be placed in a library, as Bent's letters to me have been safely housed in the William Robertson Coe Collection in the Yale University Library. The Yale collection has been microfilmed and the letters are being used by scholars.

I hope that in time George Bent will be recognized as one of the leading men in the field of Indian history and ethnology. He deserves such a standing.

GEORGE E. HYDE
OMAHA, NEBRASKA

Editor's Foreword

In Mid-Spring, 1966, George E. Hyde of Omaha, then living in a rest home with his sister, Mabel Hyde Reed, dredged up from his memories of eighty-four years a fact well known to many historians who had undertaken research on the Cheyenne Indians and events on the Great Plains in the nineteenth century. There was a manuscript, he told me, recounting fifty years of Cheyenne Indian life, related by George Bent, the son of William Bent of Bent's Old Fort and Owl Woman, a Cheyenne, a substantial part of which he had sold to the Denver Public Library in 1930. Perhaps that clear copy of eight of the fifteen chapters he had originally constructed, plus those remaining in his working notes in Omaha, might be publishable.

Thirty-six years had elapsed since Mr. Hyde had closed out of his thinking the frustrations he had experienced in trying to get the manuscript published in the early Depression years. Unable to place it with a publisher, he had offered it through a book and manuscript dealer to the Denver Public Library. Records of the Library establish the sum paid as three hundred dollars, but Mr. Hyde recalls that he actually received two hundred. The sum is less important than the economic condition it depicts. And the existence of the manuscript in Denver, unpublished for more than a third of a century, is more significant in terms of first-hand historical value than in terms of the many syntheses which have emerged on the era, the peoples, and the events on the Southern Great Plains known at first hand by George Bent.

The generous co-operation of the Denver Public Library made it

possible for me to secure a copy of the portion of the manuscript which Mr. Hyde had deposited there. Mr. John T. Eastlick, the librarian, and Mrs. Alys Freeze, his associate at the Library, kindly put their holdings of George Bent letters at my disposal. Almost simultaneously with these materials, Mr. Hyde's own working copy of the entire manuscript reached me. It has thus been possible to collate the two versions. It is clear that the Library manuscript is the one originally intended by Mr. Hyde to see the light of day, hopefully through the medium of print. But fortune favored history when he was able to locate the whole account, including the portion which carries forward from the point where the Library copy leaves off, bringing events down to 1875, practically the close of warfare between the Indians and the whites on the Southern Plains. The working copy had rested in the Hyde attic in Omaha up until the time it was sent to me, a matter of weeks before the residence was sold.

The account here published is in the first person, the narrator being George Bent. As Mr. Hyde's introduction explains, it was put together from letter exchanges between the principal and himself, beginning in 1905 and carrying down almost to the time of Bent's death in 1918. There are marginal notes in both copies of the manuscript by both Bent and Hyde, indicating that the narrator himself had an opportunity to give at least a measure of finality to the story of these stirring years of his life. It is not possible at this date to ascertain the authorship of each marginal note, but the footnotes are Mr. Hyde's except where I have added my own with proper identification.

The task of scholarly editorship on these papers might extend for months, even years. But it became clear almost at the outset that the close consultation so desirable could not be achieved. In my association with Mr. Hyde over a period of nearly thirty years, our sole means of communication has consisted of letters and, when we have been together in Omaha, scribbled notes from me and oral responses from him, owing to his total lack of hearing from about his twentieth year. Today, his added handicap of limited vision further complicates the problem. That Mr. Hyde's historical and anthropological achieve-

ments have been phenomenal becomes all the more clear from these facts. The soundest course, therefore, as I suggested to Mr. Hyde, was to move ahead as rapidly as possible to the publication of what George Bent saw and heard and did, leaving to future researchers the relation of his narrative of events to official records and to a chronology which today is more meaningful if taken from the calendar than from the moons of Cheyenne time-keeping. This plan has had his entire agreement.

Wherever and whenever possible, I have asked Mr. Hyde for such information as he could supply for footnotes ("My eyesight will not permit me to search out things in books and documents," he wrote recently). Such notes are fully identified.

It is important to say that my determination from the beginning has been (as I wrote Mr. Hyde) to treat the two manuscripts with "reverence," shying away from an all too common tendency among editors to change contexts in the interest of meaning, or simply to make better what was already good. They are, after all, documents, and the Hyde working copy will be delivered, in accordance with his wish, to the Denver Public Library with the publication of this book. My own editorial copy, typed especially for the purpose, will be deposited in the Division of Manuscripts of the University of Oklahoma Library.

The authenticity of any account of this kind, in the absence of supporting documents and the acquiescence of the principal narrator, can always remain in doubt. But in addition to the Denver Public Library holdings of Bent letters, the Coe Collection in the Yale University Library, containing the bulk of the Bent responses to Mr. Hyde's letters, several in the Colorado Historical Society, and a small number in the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, leave little room for question about what Bent said or the joint intent of himself and Hyde, within the limits of human fallibility. Bent was not only highly literate but wrote in a fair round hand; moreover, he, not Mr. Hyde, appears as the author of "Forty Years with the Cheyennes," a series of six articles which appeared from October, 1905, to March, 1906, in *The Frontier: A Magazine of the West* (Colorado Springs, Vol.

4, Nos. 4 to 9). Mr. Hyde was listed as the editor. That Bent was setting down the stuff of history could scarcely have escaped him this early in the game. What came in the next thirteen years before his death was a much more massive, detailed account of the life at Bent's Fort, the vicissitudes of the Cheyennes, and the part Bent himself played in the life of both.

The stature of a historian is often measured by the extent to which his fellow craftsmen reveal their dependence upon him. Few serious researchers working on the Great Plains and the era in which the Bents lived have been able to escape Bent's letter-remiscences and the narrative held in the Denver Public Library. For many events there are no other eye-witness accounts or no other dependable sources. It is probable, therefore, that the longer history upon which Bent and Hyde began after their tentative effort more than half a century ago will serve even larger purposes in the future.

Bent's character or rather characters have often been misunderstood. He was both white and Indian, but after he was wounded at the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864, when he was in the Cheyenne camp with his mother's people, he became increasingly Indian and often hostile in his actions, outlooks, and interpretations. His clear identification of himself with "my people," the Cheyennes, from that point becomes abundantly clear in his narrative. It also accounts for certain of Bent's glosses upon the actions of his people thereafter, and certain attributions of other tribes, notably the burning of the bodies of Patrick Hennessy and three of his wagoneers by Osages on July 3, 1874, after the men had been killed by Cheyennes. It takes no profound understanding of Indian character to get at these tendencies (some of which have an amusing quality of tongue in cheek), which have been exhibited often by far more sophisticated interpreters of human history than Bent.

The need for giving at least that minimum of annotation which appears in the book has been far more time-consuming than I had earlier expected. But is it hoped that that minimum will be more serviceable to the purposes of the two men who sought to give a unique record of happenings in a heroic age.

To George E. Hyde, who has honored me by entrusting me with the responsibility I have described, my sincere thanks. It is not every chronicler of the past who says, "Bosh, make any change you think necessary in the interest of a good book!" And my thanks to him also for asking me to join him in the editing of the George Bent letters, a large task which is already under way.

SAVOIE LOTTINVILLE
NORMAN, OKLAHOMA

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Chapter One

My People, The Cheyennes

A short introductory paragraph would not be amiss here setting forth the fact that in the early chapter or chapters Bent will set forth the reliable accounts of early history of tribe, accounts seldom told only among themselves.

GB.1

Our people call themselves *Tsis tsis tas*, meaning "people alike" or simply "our people," but by the whites we have always been termed "Cheyennes," from a Sioux word, *Shai ena*, which means "people speaking a strange tongue." The Sioux gave us this name over two hundred years ago, and many other tribes, and the whites, have adopted the name from the Sioux.

Indian tribes are grouped by ethnologists in linguistic families or stocks, each stock composed of a number of tribes speaking dialects of the same language. Some of those stocks are very small, including only three or four tribes, while the Kiowas form a stock all by themselves, as no tribe has ever been found speaking a language in any way related to the Kiowa tongue. The Cheyennes belong to the great group of tribes speaking the Algonquian language, in which stock are included the Algonkins, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Crees, Chippewas or Ojibwas, Blackfeet, Atsinas, Missisauigis, Micmacs, Ottawas, Penobscots, Sacs and Foxes, Potawatomis, Piankashaws, Michigameas, Peorias, Narragansets, Powhatans, Mohegans, Delawares, Shawnees, and a great many other tribes, occupying in early times a vast territory

1 Longhand note, signed GB, but too round to be in George Bent's hand.S.L.