**Cultural Contact Lesson Narrative and Vocabulary**

**Intro:**

Bent’s Fort began as a trading post in the southern plains during the 1830s. People who visited the post were either from regional Native American tribes or were traders and merchants traveling along the Santa Fe Trail between Santa Fe (then Mexico) and Independence, MO. The trade at Bent’s Fort centered on the buffalo robe market. Cheyenne and Arapaho members hunted and processed the buffalo into large, warm robes to be exchanged for other useful goods like fabrics, cookware, tools, etc. However, the owners of the fort, Charles Bent and his friend, Ceran St. Vrain saw the potential to expand commerce by situating themselves in the Colorado territory between the two ends of the Santa Fe Trail. In fact, Bent’s Fort was the only establishment along the route when it began in 1833. The property was bounded by the Arkansas River to its south, which at that time served as the boundary to Mexico. The Bent, St. Vrain, & Company positioned itself close to the natural resources it needed such as water, game animals, cottonwoods, shortgrass prairie, and buffalo. As a Borderland post, the company had regular access and contact with both Mexico and various other Native American nations.

**Lesson Narrative:**

Charles Bent and his friend, Ceran St. Vrain, established Bent’s Fort in the Colorado territory back in 1833. However, neither of them stayed in the area. Instead, they established more trading posts to the south in Taos and Santa Fe. Both of these towns were located in Mexico during this time. Given that they owned posts in the United States as well as Mexico gave them an economic advantage. Further, because they had ties at both ends of the Santa Fe Trail as well as Bent’s Fort in between, the Bent, St. Vrain, and Company was a major influence in the products and means of trade.

Since Mexico had recently received its independence from Spain in 1821, it was eager to do business with the United States. With Charles and Ceran anchored in Mexico, they could forge U.S./Mexican partnerships and be able to regularly associate with their trading partners. They could also stay informed about the trends of commercial markets in the south so that they could make good financial decisions. In *Blood in the Borderlands*, David Beyreis writes, “Bent proved himself a competent wagon train captain, so he would spend the spring and summer hauling goods along the trail…Ceran would stay in New Mexico, where his Catholicism, knowledge of Spanish, and expanding network of contacts would help boost the business” p. 20.

George Bent, the half Anglo, half-Cheyenne son of William Bent and Owl Woman grew up at Bent’s Fort and recalled the following: “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. In later years when the emigrant travel on the Oregon Trail up the Platte Valley grew heavy, many of the horses and mules were driven up there and traded to the emigrants” *Life of George Bent* by George Hydep. 69.

While partnering with Mexico was crucial to BSV and Company for things like silver, chocolate, beans, livestock, and woven textiles, the international aspect of trade at Bent’s Fort did not stop there. Coffee, an essential staple along the Trail, came from countries in South America as it still does today. Sugar came from Cuba. The English-made Northwest trade gun was used extensively during this period for hunting and defense by Anglos, Mexicans, and Native Americans alike. England also shipped calico fabrics and wool blankets. Tea made its way from China and trade beads that the Southern Plains tribes used in their traditional clothing came from Italy. Buffalo robes, which the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes produced, were distributed to the northeastern U.S., south to Mexico, and across the ocean. Consider why this type of trade and distribution would be necessary. Using buffalo robes as an example, why couldn’t other regions produce their own?

Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain started families in Mexico. Charles married Maria Ignacia Jaramillo. She was the daughter of a Taos merchant and also the widow of Jose Rafael Luna, who had been the head of customs in Taos. Maria would have been strongly connected to the people and culture of Taos, so when Charles became part of the family, those connections were extended to him as well. Maria would likely have assisted him in understanding and embracing the language, habits, diet, and religion of the area. This would have helped Charles feel comfortable as a “foreigner,” but would also have helped him in his business dealings. The post located at Bent’s Fort had a successful operation for sixteen years until 1849. This was largely due to the fact that Charles’ adoption into Mexican society and William’s adoption into Cheyenne/Arapaho society was made easier by their wives.

**Vocabulary**

**Textile** – a type of cloth or woven fabric

**Resource** – a stock or supply of money, materials, or people

**Economic** – relating to production, distribution, or consumption of goods and services

**Supply** – in economics, the amount of a good or service

**Demand** – in economics, the buyer’s desire to purchase a good or service

**Commerce/Commercial** – the activity of buying and selling on a large scale/having to do with commerce

**Food staple** – a food or drink that is eaten so frequently that it makes up a large portion of the diet

**Customs** – a government authority which regulates the flow of goods into and out of a country