**Distanced and Displaced Narrative and Vocabulary**

Even though the Bent, St. Vrain, and Company was begun by Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, it was actually managed by Charles’ younger brother, William, from 1833 to 1849. In 1835, William married a Cheyenne named Mestaahehe (Owl Woman). Their youngest son, George Bent, was born at Bent’s Fort in 1843 mingling between Anglo and Cheyenne worlds. In George’s letters, published in *The Life of George Bent* by George Hyde, he reports “Bent’s Fort was the first permanent settlement in all the central Plains region and William Bent was the first American settler within the borders of the present state of Colorado. He went there in 1824 and lived there until his death in 1869” p. 61.

While George’s father seemed to enjoy a relatively stable living situation in his adulthood, George did not. He and his Cheyenne family witnessed many changes in the era of westward expansion. While the Santa Fe Trail was a route for traders and not immigrants, nevertheless, it had significant impact on the natural resources and rhythms of Cheyenne ways of life. George writes, “Emigration to California and Oregon began about 1842, and even as early as 1845 the Indians were beginning to grow restless under this heavy movement of whites through the heart of their hunting grounds. Then came the discovery of gold in California and the great rush across the plains in ‘49. By this time grass, wood, and game had been so nearly destroyed on the Oregon Trail up the Platte that large trains of emigrants began to use the Arkansas route; thus the Cheyennes and Arapahos who live and hunted in the country between the Platte and the Arkansas found themselves caught between two great streams of white emigration. The buffalo began to decrease with alarming rapidity and the tribes foresaw the hungry years to come. Famous groves of cottonwood trees where the Indians had camped in winter for generations disappeared in a single season; the Big Timbers of the Arkansas themselves began to go, and in all the valleys for miles away from the river the grass was eaten down into the ground by the emigrants’ hungry herds” p. 95-96.

Not only did the increased traffic threaten the land itself, but also the health and safety of its inhabitants. George writes, “Then, in ‘49, the emigrants brought the cholera up the Platte Valley, and from the emigrant trains it spread to the Indian camps” p. 96. Cholera was a deadly epidemic in the United States in 1849, even taking the life of the president, James K. Polk.

George observes tensions increasing between the U.S. government and Native American nations during its advance and takeover of northern Mexico: “The War Department had begun to establish military posts in the plains to protect the emigrant roads soon after the Mexican War” p. 97-98. These three factors – depletion of land and game, disease, and military presence in the 1840s gain momentum over the next twenty years causing irreparable harm to tribes on the southern plains.

When George was ten years old, he was sent to Missouri for his education. When he returned nine years later, the territory of his childhood had transformed. He notes, “I found everything in the Upper Country greatly changed, since I had left in 1853. At that time there had been very few whites in all that region, and practically all of these had been engaged in the Indian trade and fur business. The country did not even have a name in those days. It was spoken of vaguely as “the Upper Country,” “the Upper Arkansas,” or “the mountains.” Now, in 1862, it was Colorado Territory and had an organized government and some thirty thousand whites, mostly men, were within its borders. When we went to Westport in ‘53, we made the journey by wagon, and along the five hundred miles of trail between Bent’s Fort and the Missouri frontier there was not a single house or settlement of any kind. Now there were two stage lines running up the Arkansas, stage stations, and ranches every few miles” p. 111.

Identifying with his Cheyenne heritage, George Bent went to live among Cheyenne encampments after his engagement as a Confederate in the Civil War. While residing at Sand Creek in 1864, he witnessed and fell victim to Colonel Chivington’s Third Colorado Cavalry in an unprovoked massacre. George was injured in the hip but survived the attack. Many of his extended family did not. As a result of the hostilities, George joined the Dog Soldier Society to resist the U.S. government’s advance against his people. Two years later, George took a different turn and devoted himself to working toward a peaceful resolution. He became an interpreter and negotiator during peace councils and was hired as the first Indian Agent for the Cheyenne and Arapaho people.

As an Indian agent, George hoped his influence would give his people the best possible future. Peace between Native American tribes and the U.S. government during the 1800s in the West came at a high price: the reduction of homelands and the erasure of their longstanding way of life. The following treaties contributed to the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho’s move away from the shortgrass prairie region surrounding Bent’s Fort to small reservations in Oklahoma, where descendant communities still live and thrive today:

Little Arkansas Treaty 1865 – allowed access to lands south of the Arkansas River as long as no harm was committed against Anglo traffic on the Santa Fe Trail (The treaty only lasted two years as both sides claimed the other was not living up to their promise.)

Medicine Lodge Treaty 1867 – removed Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes from their homelands and relocated them to present day Oklahoma. It was not ratified by the tribes. It significantly reduced their land area which prevented them from continuing cultural practices.

**Vocabulary**

**Cession –** formally giving up rights to property or territory

**Treaty –** an official agreement between nations

**Westward expansion –** movement of mostly Anglo settlers into the western territories of the United States in order to benefit from the land and its resources

**Displaced –** a person or object moved from its original or proper place

**Depletion –** reduction in the amount of something

**Irreparable –** unable to be repaired

**Stage lines –** routes for mail or passenger travel that were run by stagecoach companies

**Massacre** – the killing of a number of helpless and unresisting human beings

**Dog Soldier –** One belonging to a Cheyenne military society for the resistance against American westward expansion

**Indian agent –** an individual authorized to interact with Native American tribes on behalf of the U.S. government

**Reservation –** an area of land set aside for Native American occupation