CHAPTER VI

THE FORTS OF WELD COUNTY

Toward the middle of the 19th century, in 1836, came a white man seeking trade with the Indians. He built a Fort on the bank of the South Platte about twenty-five miles south of the present site of the Weld County Court House. He was of a mild and friendly disposition and sought friendly relationships with the Indians. He brought merchandise to trade with them for the hides of buffalos which were plentiful in the Indian country. With all their past experiences the Indians still believed that not all white men were their enemies, and so met the new-comer half way, and a peaceful and profitable trade resulted.

How Lancaster Lupton built his Fort is not a matter of record. It was a large structure, perhaps 75 by 100 or 125 feet, and must have required both skill and labor in erection. The skill he had, but the labor must have been more than any one man could have performed alone. There is no account of any other white men coming with him, and there were surely none here before him; so the conclusion seems obvious that whatever of help he had must have come from the Indians. The material used was adobe made of mud and grass roots and worked together and shaped into squares and dried in the sun. There is no detailed description of the Fort in any History, but it is said to have been patterned after those of the Bent Brothers on the Arkansas River.

If this be so it must have had walls about fourteen feet in height, with loop holes at regular intervals about shoulder distance from the ground, and with bastions and towers at the corners reaching up above the walls with loopholes and a look-out near their top, and an interior court around which were arranged living and storage rooms.

Whether or not this Fort, (Lupton) had a roof became a part of the general discussion regarding all the forts along the Platte at the time of the reconstruction of Fort Vasquez. George

East who superintended the work of reconstruction maintained that there had been no roof, while others contended that without a roof no Fort could have furnished shelter for supplies in trade, the home of the trader nor the settlers who later found refuge therein from storms and threatened raids of hostile Indians. There is no positive proof on either side; Mr. East relied on the lack of evidence of there ever having been a roof, and the others upon the conclusion reasoned out that no Fort could have furnished shelter without it.

But one thing known is that the Fort was built; and that it served a useful purpose for a good many years, just how many is not known. There is a large square stone marker built of boulders and cement at the side of the road on Highway 85 pointing the traveler to a spot, a quarter of a mile west, where a marble monument marks the site of the Fort; and where, but a few feet distant, stands a portion of the old wall built more than a hundred years ago. This is on the farm owned by E. W. Ewing who is always glad to show the historic ruins to visitors.

Years later when white settlement was well under way, a group of white people built a town near the old Fort and named it in honor of the First Settler. They called it Fort Lupton, and in 1890 incorporated under that name. It has ever been one of the most progressive towns of the county.

But when Lancaster Lupton built his Fort on the Platte in 1836 there was no white man's town a mile to the south of him; there was no white man's habitation of any kind nearer than Kansas City. Later came other traders and built forts and trading posts along the Platte, but at first Lupton's nearest white neighbor was about 600 miles away.

So the statement stands unchallenged that Lancaster Lupton was the first white settler in Weld county, the first trader, the first farmer, and that he preceded the county itself by about 23 years. And because of all this he has earned a place in the history of the county that should entitle him to more than a passing notice. Hence the following story of his life.

THE LIFE STORY OF LANCASTER LUPTON WELD COUNTY'S FIRST CITIZEN

Lancaster Lupton had a chekered career with the dark squares predominating. Courageously he bore the hardships of this wild new country, but built no fortune therefrom, and finally yielded to the accumulation of disappointments and misfortunes and lived out his life with few of his ambitions realized. Yet through it all he seems to have developed no bitterness of spirit, but to have maintained a poise and gentleness of character to the end. A picture taken shortly before his death at the age of seventy-eight, shows a calm and benign countenance.

He was born in New York state in 1807, the same year that Zebulon M. Pike ended his disastrous expedition through this Rocky Mountain country.

At the age of eighteen, in 1825, he entered the United States Military Academy at West Point; graduated four years later and entered the Army with the brevet of Second Lieutenant of the Third Infantry stationed at Jefferson barracks, St. Louis. In 1833 he was made Lieutenant of the First Dragoons and saw service at Fort Gibson, now Oklahoma, on the Santa Fe Trail. In 1935 he was made a First Lieutenant and placed in command of Company A under Colonel Dodge who led a detachment of the Dragoons to the Rocky Mountain region. And it was when passing through this part of the country that Lupton saw such unmistakable possibilities and became so interested that within the year he resigned from the army and returned to seek his fortune in the new country. He was now twenty-nine years of age and full of hopes and plans. This in 1836.

His stock of merchandise for trade with the Indians consisted mostly of bright colored blankets, looking glasses, bells and bracelets, sparkling glass beads and tobacco. In his later stores of merchandise it is said that whiskey was included, but not until fierce competition that came with later traders forced him to it.

What he received from the Indians was at first almost ex-

clusively beaver skins. Beaver hats were the fashion among the royalty of England, and consequently among the aristocracy of America, and the raw material for their making was to be found on the backs of the industrious little animals that build such wonderful dams across the streams.

But Dame Fashion was fickle then as now, and when the Prince of Wales "changed his hat" (quoting from Judge Bradfield) it was the undoing of Trader Lupton. American aristocracy could not wear beaver when Royalty wore silk; and so, when across the ocean flew Dame Fashion with that edict, the American demand for beaver skins declined to the vanishing point and Trader Lupton had no longer a market. In which extremity all he could do was to fall back on buffalo robes.

Of course it was well to have a thing so soft as a buffalo robe to fall back upon, but it did not save Lancaster Lupton a hard jolt; for by this time other traders had come in and Lupton had to share his robe with them.

He held on, however, from start to finish, about ten years, toward the end supplementing his failing trade with agriculture. And this is the fact that fixes his claim for all time to the distinction of being Weld county's first farmer. John C. Fremont gave proof of this when, after passing through this country in 1843, he told of Lupton's fine garden and fields of vegetables that has just been destroyed by high water.

It is said that misfortune never come singly. In this case they came in droves, attacking him on every side. First, fashion and competition took his trade, then nature's forces took his crop. That seemed the last straw, but it wasn't. He turned over his cattle and poultry to pay for his provisions, and, utterly discouraged, returned to the home of his parents in Wisconsin. There is no record of his having sold the Fort; it must have been simply deserted.

Then he tried for re-instatement in the army, but failed. He had resigned, and for this could not be forgiven; there was no military post for him any where. He was not happy in the old home, so returned to the West, taking shelter at Bent's Fort

on the Arkansas. From there he wrote to President Harrison asking for an Indian Agency, but the president turned a deaf ear to his request.

In the spring of 1847 he went to Hardscrabble, between Canon City and Pueblo, a place well worthy of the name, and there started farming.

After a while, however, it seemed that Fate relented somewhat, and called off her flock of misfortunes; for the scattered bits of history pieced together show something of tranquility from that time on. He married the daughter of a Cheyenne Chieftain and settled down to farming. Eight sons and daughters came to them. During the Gold Rush of '49 he and his wife moved to Arcata, California and there reared their family of eight; and it was there that the Final Summons came to him, on August 2, 1885. A grand-daughter was found at that place recently by the State Historical Society, and it was she who gave the facts of his latter years.

THE OLD FORT IN LATER YEARS

Up to the year 1859 the old Fort was practically abandoned, then it took on life again as a camping place for travelers westward bound, and for wandering tribes of dispossessed but peaceful Indians. Later when dispossession became more fully realized the tribes became less peaceful and the Fort a refuge for the harrassed whites.

It was a camp and corral for the emigrant trains on their way to the Pike's Peak Country where gold was to be shoveled up like sand—according to reports. And later it became a stage station for mail and express on the Overland Route. During the expected Indian up-risings of 1864 it served as a refuge for many settlers along the South Platte. It is the one spoken of in the letter of Henry A. Smith, (in the Pioneer Stories) as the place to which his family hastened in the night when warned by the famous Gerry of the reported up-rising.

And this is the History commemorated by the Monument just west of the Marker that stands by the side of the road at

the edge of Ft. Lupton; that stands like a sentinel, silently guarding the Memories of the Past.

OTHER FORTS;

FORT ST. VRAIN AND FORT VASQUEZ.

John Charles Fremont, in the Memoirs of his travels in 1843, speaks of passing two abandoned Forts before reaching that of Lancaster Lupton. One of these was most likely the trading post of Vasquez and Sublet and the other that of the more obscure traders, Locke and Randolph. Of the latter not much is definitely known, but of the former, owing to recent activities and developments, something quite worth while may be told: the Old Fort Vasquez has been re-constructed.

FORT VASQUEZ, THE RECONSTRUCTION.

On the southern edge of Platteville, east of Highway 85, stands the re-constructed Fort of Louis Vasquez, built originally in 1838.

The question has been asked why this Fort, of less importance historically than either Fort Lupton or Fort St. Vrain, was selected for reconstruction? The question is easily answered: the people of Platteville were at the bottom of it. Not that the people of Ft. Lupton or St. Vrain were indifferent to their Forts, but that Ft. Lupton had its monument and marker and the town commemorating the name; and Fort St. Vrain was not on the main traveled highway. Hence no friction has ever been caused by the selection.

In 1935 the people of Platteville, realizing the importance of restoring the old ruins as a link between the past and present, went before the county commissioners and asked that application be made to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for funds for the re-construction of the old Fort. The commissioners readily complied with the request; the matters was carried to the FERA where it quickly found favor and funds

amounting to $2,500 were allotted to the work.

The grounds upon which the old fort had stood had long since become private property and were now a part of the farm owned by the sisters, Mrs. Pearl Pardue and Miss Ethel Hoffman. These owners willingly donated the site. The grounds and the money now being provided the enthusiastic promoters faced the baffling question as to just what was to be built; how to know just what the old Fort had been.

There was not enough of it left to give a clue, and there were no written records.

To meet this perplexing situation the promoters called on Dr. W. G. Beneweiss of Greeley who had done research work for the State Historical Society, and he undertook the task. He knew it was not an easy one, but gave it his best endeavors, and, finally succeeded in contacting a son of one of the early owners of the land who remembered the stories his father had told him in his boyhood days of the time when the old Fort was in its prime, or, at least, before the time of its decay. From this man a fairly good outline was obtained, and later amplified by information gathered from a group of Pueblo Indians. So, putting this and that together a quite workable plan evolved. This plan was placed in the hands of George East who had long made a study of the subject, and the work began. And so it is that after the passing of a hundred years Old Fort Vasquez has reappeared.

As the work progressed difficulties presented themselves, the first of which was that the material from which the Old Fort had been made was no longer available; the adobe bricks had been made of clay and grass roots; but the plows of civilization had long ago turned up the roots and turned under the clay; so mud that had been a subsoil and straw that had grown above the surface had to be substituted.

As the work progressed so did criticism; there was no shelter, no roof; no "lid" as one expressed it; and the walls were too low to give protection from the fire brands that the Indians might have tossed over. The answer to this was that Ft. Vasquez was not built as was Ft. Lupton, for a real fort, but only as a

stockade and trading post, and that therefore a "lid" was not in order. Two rooms have been built in the southwest corner which the critics say were not in the original; and Mr. East replies, "of course not; they are there now for the use of a care-taker, a personage not needed in the original, but essential now to prevent defacement or other injury to the great historical landmark." Which leads to the supposition that vandals were not so plentiful a hundred years ago as now. Leads also to the story of how a portion of the original wall still standing up to a few years ago, vanished.

This story is that one day a boy playing about the ruins saw by the glint of a sunbeam a dime down in a crevase of the wall. A dime was worth going after, and he went after it. The tearing down of old real adobe walls that had stood there since before his grandfather was born meant labor, but what of that? wasn't there a dime down there? and might there not be more? a hundred dollars, maybe. Older boys have been lured by similar prospects. So he labored with a will and finally the dime was his. After that he returned again and again to the scene of his "find," but after a while other boys were attracted to the scene and the search for hidden wealth became frantic and thorough. The story stops quite unsatisfactorily right here, and it was never known whether other wealth was found or not, but it is known that the fragment of wall that might have served as a pattern, vanished completely, leaving hardly a track upon the ground.

Before leaving the controversy over the "lid", a brief description of the Forts of the Bent Brothers down on the Arkansas which furnished model for those of the Platte may be in order.

Histories generally agree on these main points: that the walls of the Bent Forts were six feet thick at the base and rose seventeen feet in height; had on opening, a wide gateway in the east wall; that the parapeted bastions had an inner diameter of ten feet; that the living and storage rooms were backed against the outer walls, with an opening upon an inner central court; that the walled corral for stock was at the rear wall outside; that *heavy timbered rafters supported an adobe roof*, the strong point

of which was its resistence to fire. So the later ones at least had a pattern for a roof. The ground dimensions were 100x150 feet.

Lupton and St. Vrain were supposed to follow this pattern faithfully, though on a smaller scale. Vasquez was the smaller and Fremont said it was a "more temporary" building; so perhaps Mr. East wins out after all.

FORT ST. VRAIN.

This Fort, 75 by 125 feet dimensions, was probably the most complete of all the Forts along the Platte and the best copy of the Bent Forts down on the Arkansas. In fact it was built by Bent Brothers themselves with their business partner, Ceran St. Vrain. This was in 1838. Its favorable location a mile north of St. Vrain Creek put it in direct line between two of the most famous Forts of the day and gave it the advantage of being a half-way station between the two, Ft. Laramie on the north and Fort Bent on the south; and on the trail that ran through what is now Fifteenth street in Denver; all of which gave Fort St. Vrain an importance second only to its north and south terminals. And now it is not even on the main road. It is said to have been a successful competitor of Fort Lupton, and may have helped to hasten the day of Lupton's failure.

However, the commercial triumph of Fort St. Vrain was short-lived, and it, too, was soon abandoned. The Historian Parkman who visited it in 1845 states in his book "The Oregon Trail," that it was then "abandoned and fast falling into decay," and that even the horses of his party "recoiled in horror" from it.

And much later the Pony Express passed over the trail that in an earlier day had made Fort St. Vrain famous.