

Meet Charlotte, Wm. Bent's Slave



Real People! Real Stories!

Santa Fe Trail Hall of Fame

“Charlotte”

(Birth/Death date unknown)

- Slave
- Dancer
- Entertainer
- Fabulous Cook

(Note: In spite of the fact that little is known about Charlotte, her mention in so many diaries has earned her a spot in the Santa Fe Trail Hall of Fame.)

Real People! Real Stories!

Almost every record of a visit to Bent's Old Fort included lavish praise of Charlotte, the Negro slave of William Bent and the wife of Dick, another slave at the fort. Her inclusion in so many journals is remarkable as she lived in an era when slaves were often ignored or kept in the background. Charlotte's fame along the Santa Fe Trail and throughout the entire Rocky Mountain fur trade region was based on two accomplishments.

The first was her amazing ability as a cook. Travelers along the Trail often wrote of their eager anticipation of arriving at the fort and dining at Charlotte's table. When Col. Henry Dodge visited the fort in 1835, he and his staff were treated to a "lavish dinner". In *Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail*, Lewis Garrard described her as a "cultural divinity." George Ruxton noted in *Life in the Far West* that Charlotte's slap-jacks and pumpkin pies were celebrated in Colorado from Long's Peak in the north to the Spanish Peaks in the south. Presiding over a kitchen staff of Mexican and Indian helpers, Charlotte's culinary skills offered all workers and guests at the fort a delightful respite from the monotony of trail and trapper food.

Her second accomplishment was her gift as an entertainer. Ruxton noted that Charlotte loved to characterize herself as "de onlee lady in de dam Injun country." Garrard noted that dances were held nightly at the fort and that Charlotte and Rosalie, a helper in the kitchen, were eagerly let to the dance floor "to trip the light fantastic toe." Charlotte, however, was "the center of attention, the belle of the evening...who acted her part to perfection." She brought to the dance floor steps from the states, not the rude and wild dances of the frontier. She was in great demand as a partner by all.

Little else is known of Charlotte. Marc Simmons, in *Kit Carson and His Three Wives*, notes that Kit Carson may have asked Charlotte to care for his two orphaned children when he was employed at the fort as a hunter in 1841. The last we see of her is in 1847 when she and her husband left for Missouri as free persons. William Bent had granted both Charlotte and Dick their freedom in gratitude for Dick's bravery in the battle at Taos Pueblo which resulted in the defeat of the Indian rebels who had murdered William's brother Charles. However, unlike countless other persons on the frontier, Charlotte lives on in the fond memories of her cooking skills and her grace as a dancer.