

Ceran St. Vrain's Stone Mill at Mora

Ceran St. Vrain's stone mill at Mora was probably built in 1864, the last mill he built and the culmination of his fifteen years as a flour miller. It is a rectangular, gambrel-roofed building, crudely built of rough-hewn, random-sized stone blocks laid up unevenly with thick and untrimmed mortar. Not a thing of beauty but a structure of honest utility, the mill was built to resist fire and time, and so it has, for over a century.

St. Vrain's first mill at Mora was of frame, a large building put up in the spring and summer of 1850, as events of St. Vrain's life indicate. In the summer of 1848, St. Vrain dissolved his partnership with William Bent in Bent's Fort on the Arkansas, and went to St. Louis to pay off the creditors of Bent, St. Vrain & Co. He returned west in the fall of 1848. On January 31, 1849, he joined Isaac McCarty in a partnership contracting to take the U.S. mail between Santa Fe and Fort Leavenworth. In February, 1849, St. Vrain went east with the mail and returned to Santa Fe where he and McCarty opened a store, and eventually two stores. In 1850, as the census records show, St. Vrain, McCarty, Vicente St. Vrain and several other male clerks and servants were living together in a house in Santa Fe.

By early 1850, St. Vrain and McCarty had obtained a contract to supply army posts in New Mexico with flour. St. Vrain went to Westport (Kansas City) in March, 1850, and hired five experienced millers, among them Jacob Beard. He also bought five sets of French buhr mills which he shipped to New Mexico for his flour mills to be built at Mora, Taos, Santa Fe and Peralta (he sold the fifth set). His first and largest mill was soon built at Mora, and run by Jacob Beard from 1850 until 1852.¹ In 1850 its flour supplied army posts at Cantonment Burgwin near Taos, at Rayado, and at Socorro, and was described as "course [sic] and gritty...[but] being made of new wheat is not objected to by the troops." Coarse as it was, at 8¢ per pound the flour compared favorably

ably, in price at least, with the more refined product shipped from the States at 17¢ per pound.²

In October, 1850, Isaac McCarty died at Santa Fe and the firm of St. Vrain & McCarty came to an end. St. Vrain then moved to Taos where he lived for the next thirteen or fourteen years and operated a flour mill on the little stream called Rio Grande del Ranchos, seven miles south of Don Fernando de Taos.³ The larger mill at Mora was left in the hands of Jacob Beard, and it earned \$100 a day for its owner. At the end of a year Jacob Beard asked for a raise in salary to \$100 per month, which was good pay in those days. In 1852 Beard was replaced as manager of the mill by William Bransford, who also ran a store at Mora for St. Vrain. Two years later Bransford demanded a share in the business. St. Vrain offered him a flat settlement of \$1000 instead, which Bransford declined.⁴ After that, St. Vrain's son Vicente and Theodore Mignault appear to have managed the Mora business.


The frame mill at Mora continued to produce flour for the army and citizens of New Mexico for many years to come, but the only four descriptions I have found of it are all dated 1853. Says William Carr Lane's diary under date of Sept. 1, 1853, "Reached Mora...M^r St Brain has a merchant mill here."⁵ James A. Bennett spent the night of Jan. 9, 1853, at Mora, where he saw "a large flouring mill...built the same as those in the United States..."⁶ Col. Mansfield's report notes that "a good flouring mill is established at the village of Moro and in the Valley of Taos by Mr. St. Vrain..."⁷ and C.F. Clark wrote that "Mr. St. Vrain...is now very wealthy owning & carrying on three large grist mills..."⁸

Although flour-milling was his principal business, Ceran St. Vrain had other interests. In 1853 he sent men to settle his huge land grant, the Vigil and St. Vrain or Las Animas Grant in southeastern Colorado. During the 1850s he held the sutlerships of Fort Massachusetts, Fort Union and Fort Garland. After gold was discovered on Cherry Creek in 1858, he sent wagon trains of goods

and flour to the new settlements and established stores at Denver, Pueblo, Tarryall (Fairplay) and other places in the gold regions. He also bought into a flour mill at San Luis on the Culebra and at Francisco and Daigre's ranch on the Cucharas which supplied flour for the growing settlements of Colorado Territory.

In 1864, St. Vrain was still living at Taos, although his mills at Mora and elsewhere, his land grant in the Arkansas Valley of Colorado, and interests at Denver and Santa Fe caused him often to be absent from that place.⁹ But on June 29, 1864, as he wrote John Francisco from Taos, his flour mills so occupied him that he could not leave Taos to attend to his other concerns,¹⁰ for that summer six thousand Navajos were herded to exile at Fort Sumner, and St. Vrain had obtained the flour contract to supply the Indians. Through June, July and August of 1864, his mills provided the government with \$41,000. worth of flour and wheat meal.¹¹

Then on July 29, 1864, St. Vrain's mill near Taos burned to the ground, at a loss to its owner of \$5000, and at a time when his commitments to the government were at their height.¹² Perhaps because of this accident St. Vrain determined to build a fireproof mill at Mora, and to move there to operate it. On Jan. 27, 1865, St. Vrain dissolved his partnership in the mill at San Luis,¹³ At about this time he moved to Mora with his mistress Luisa Branch and her young daughter by him, Felicite, both of whom are mentioned in his will made on April 2, 1866, at Mora.¹⁴ There they lived in a house next to the public square and court-house, and there St. Vrain died on Oct. 28, 1870.

I have found no documentary evidence for the date the stone mill at Mora was erected. My guess would be 1864, after the destruction by fire of St. Vrain's mill at Taos, and during the period of extraordinary requirements of the U.S. Army for flour to feed the Navajos at Fort Sumner. The crudeness of its construction suggests it was put up in a hurry (its masonry is similar to that of Maxwell's Aztec Mill at Cimarron, which bears the date 1864). 

Both the stone mill and the old frame mill were in operation at the time of St. Vrain's death. The frame mill, called "el molino viejo" (the old mill), was rented after his death for \$800 a year until 1872, when the rental was reduced to \$550 per year. The stone mill, called "el molino de piedra", was rented for \$400 in 1874 and valued at \$15,000. in 1875.¹⁵ St. Vrain's estate was divided between his sons Vicente and Felix, and his daughter Felicite, for whom Vicente and his wife Amelia were guardians. By 1877 Vicente had died and Amelia decided to go to Texas. To her brother, William Rohman, she traded all her property in Mora, which included a stone grist mill and a frame grist mill, for land in Texas.¹⁶ The frame mill has long since disappeared, but the stone mill still stands, and the condition of the building and its iron water wheel shows that it continued to supply the region with flour long after the advent of electricity made most water wheels superfluous.

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- 1 Jacob Beard to F.W. Cragin, El Paso, Texas, Oct. 31, 1904, Cragin Collection, Pioneers' Museum, Colorado Springs.
- 2 Col. George Archibald McCall, New Mexico in 1850: A Military View, ed. Robert W. Frazer (Norman, 1968), 141, 150, 165, 169.
- 3 Letter of Charles Beaubien to James S. Calhoun, June 11, 1851, The Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun... (Washington, 1915), 357-58.
- 4 Jacob Beard, "Reminiscences", Interview in the Samuel W. DeBusk Memorial, Colorado State Historical Society Library, Denver, Colo.
- 5 New Mexico Historical Review XXXIX/4 (Oct., 1964), 289-90.
- 6 Forts and Forays..., eds. Clinton E. Brooks and Frank D. Reeve (Albuquerque, 1948), 41.
- 7 Mansfield on the Condition of the Western Forts, 1853-54, ed. Robert W. Frazer (Norman, 1963), 36.
- 8 Letter of C.F. Clark to his father, Cantonment Burgwin, Dec. 22, 1853, in H.O. Brayer, To Form a More Perfect Union... (Albuquerque, 1941), 63.
- 9 Letter of Henry Daigre to J.M. Francisco, Taos, Jan. 20, 1864, Francisco Papers, Colorado State Historical Society Library, Denver.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 "Condition of the Indian Tribes," S. Report 156, 39th Cong., 2d Sess., (Ser. 1279), app., pp. 276-77.
- 12 Rocky Mountain News (D), Aug. 27 [26], 1864, p.3.c.2. The mill was rebuilt and still in operation as late as 1908, but there is nothing to indicate St. Vrain ever again operated it. (Juan Estevan [Santistevan], Taos, April 24, 1908, to F.W. Cragin, Cragin Collection.)
- 13 Ibid, March 30, 1865, p.1, c. 3.
- 14 Mora County (N.M.) Records, Book III, pp. 54-5.
- 15 Mora County (N.M.) Records, Book B, pp. 233, 235.
- 16 Mora County (N.M.) Records, Book 4, pp. 133-34.