

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.  
Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Fifty-Nine

## KIT CARSON

### LESSON IDEA

To develop an appreciation of the courage, determination, and ingenuity that were required to develop our western territories, by studying the life of one of the most famous "mountain men," Kit Carson.

### PREPARATION

Read "During The Week" and make some preliminary preparations for the project suggested. Since the next four lessons will deal with the West, any pictures you can find of the people or land would be helpful in giving younger members of the family a better understanding of the events we will be discussing.

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**K**IT CARSON, one of the great Americans of the Old West, might have grown up like other Kentucky boys of the 1800's, one of a family of fourteen children, eating mush and molasses with a long wooden spoon, or sitting on a rail fence dreaming of the time when he could handle his own long rifle. But when Kit, whose real name was Christopher, was only a year old, his family left the Blue Grass State to settle on the Missouri frontier. On their way through Hardin County, Kentucky, they must have passed near the log cabin where Nancy Hanks Lincoln was caring for her infant son — Kit's senior by eleven months — who was to preside over the nation which Kit Carson did so much to expand.

The Carsons had been pioneers for generations — since the first one left Scotland for the freedom and opportunity of America. Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Kentucky — they had lived in each state for awhile, only to move on as the wildness

of the frontier gave way to settlements and farms. The presence of danger was more to their liking than the presence of neighbors. And the young, tow-headed Kit grew up in the rough-and-tumble style of all frontier boys, his ears full of tales of adventure, of Indian raids, of Daniel Boone, of the Revolution and the War of 1812, of Andrew Jackson and the defeat of the British at New Orleans.

At the age of fifteen he was apprenticed to a saddler in the frontier town of Franklin. His favorite customers were the mountain men — those strong, self-reliant individualists of the wilderness who trapped beaver and fought Indians in the great Southwest, which was then under the rule of Mexico. They told him yarns of the mountains; of Taos, the trappers' rendezvous in New Mexico; of Indian skirmishes and Spanish señoritas. They freely voiced their scorn of all civilized fixin's.

**K**IT WAS SIXTEEN YEARS OLD when he left his bench at the saddle shop and joined a Santa Fe wagon train as a "cavy boy" — a herd boy responsible for the lame oxen, sore-backed mules, untamed ponies, and extra saddle-horses that followed the caravan. Within two weeks he had learned how to find and rope stray animals; how to sleep soundly in spite of hard ground, mosquitoes, stamping mules, talk and singing; how to go without food until noon and to endure the soaking of a thunderstorm without complaint. The more he learned and the more he listened to the mountain men, to the Indian hunters, to the teamsters, the

more determined he was to go as far west as he could. He wanted to learn to trap, and to become a mountain man. He needed experience and an opportunity; while he worked and waited, he took whatever job he could find with the wagon trains moving back and forth along the Santa Fe trail. What he did not know how to do, he learned to do. For example, here is how he became a cook.

"Sure, I'll give you a job," the owner of the trader's post at Taos told him. "Can ye cook?"

"Never tried it yet," Kit confessed.

"Wal, ye'll never larn any younger. You're hired."

"What do I git outen it?" asked Kit, hoping for a small weekly wage.

"Show me yore cookin' first."

Kit went into the kitchen and put together a meal of potatoes, buffalo meat, hot coffee, and flapjacks. His new employer looked at the mess and said, "Set down, Kit, and help yerself. Seems like I kinder lost my appetite today, somehow."

Hungry as he was, Kit couldn't get down more than one forkful. "'Pears like you think I'm a pore make-out of a cook," he admitted. "But you hired me. Don't forget that."

"Sure, I hired ye. I'll stick by my word, Kit . . . I reckon I'll hev to give ye yore board." He sighed to think of the food he would have to eat until Kit learned to cook. But by the time spring arrived, the plucky youngster was turning out dinners that seemed to satisfy. He hadn't earned any money, but he had been fed and housed for another winter.

What do you think of Kit's determination to stick it out until he reached his goal? What does this tell us about his character? [In the discussion draw comparisons between Kit's persistence, in taking or learning any job that would bring him

nearer his goal, and the amount of persistence family members show in pursuing their individual goals. Emphasize the point that he did not give up, even though it was rough going.]

IN THE SUMMER of 1829, when Kit was nineteen and desperately trying to raise money for a trip back to Santa Fe, the opportunity came he had been waiting for. "Never you mind Santy Fee," said Ewing Young, the man who had first hired him as a cook. "Come along with me, an' I'll larn ye to raise hair and set trap for beaver. How about it? You don't want to drive team no more, do ye?" [Explain that "to raise hair" means to scalp warring Indians.]

Kit's chance had come! He knew from talk by other mountain men that Young's trapping expedition had a dual purpose – to bring back a fortune in beaver skins and to put an end to the Apache attacks on Young's trappers. It might be his first and last trip, but the added danger only excited him more.

Forty men rode out of Taos that autumn, rifles ready, and prepared for nine months on the trail. As they moved through Navajo country and into Apache territory, they knew their enemy outnumbered them. But they knew, also, that their great advantage was their willingness to cooperate, their power of organization. They could depend upon each other. The Indian, on the other hand, fought as an individual; he believed in dreams, omens, luck, or "medicine." When he thought his luck was bad, he simply quit the fight and went home to his lodge. Indian charges inevitably broke when met by the solid resistance of mountain men. It was this knowledge, born of years of experience, that brought the trappers their Apache victory – and Kit his first scalp – at the headwaters of Salt River.

When the attack had come, Kit aimed and fired with a deadly singleness of purpose. After it was over and he had inspected the redskin he killed, he felt a little shaky. His reward came not from hanging the scalp on his belt, but when he overheard Young say, "Kit thar's a likely young un. He'll make a mountain man yit."

War-whooping head-on attacks were only one of the Indian dangers the trappers faced. Another was

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The story of all the adventures of the "Carson Men" – the celebrated organization of trappers organized and led by Kit – would make an encyclopedia. Starting with Joe Meek, Bill Mitchell, and three Delaware Indians, the group grew to as many as forty or fifty men in later years. Their wilderness experiences, as well as many other Carson exploits, are told by Stanley Vestal in *Kit Carson: The Happy Warrior Of The Old West*. We recommend it for extra reading.

thievery — Indians creeping into camp at night, stealing traps and packs, cutting the throats of horses and mules, and generally making a nuisance of themselves. It was all part of a trapper's life — along with wading icy mountain streams, skillfully setting a line of traps, checking them each day, dressing the skins, and living on what meat could be killed between times. Westward they pushed, down the Salt River and up its tributaries, across the desert to the brim of the Grand Canyon (they were, perhaps, the first white men to look down into that sublime chasm), up the Mohave River and into California, and back to Taos. At journey's end, they had two thousand pounds of beaver. In 1830 these were worth about twenty-four thousand dollars. For Kit payday meant new clothes, a genuine beaver hat, a silver-mounted saddle, a shiny new rifle, a fine California mule, and a saddlebag full of silver.

But by the end of summer, the new wealth was gone — lost at the Taos poker tables and cock-fights, spent on trinkets and ribbons for dark-eyed señoritas, or meals and drinks for friends who were "a little down on their luck." Like most of the mountain men, Kit was a spender whenever his pockets were full; and when they were empty, he lived on credit or another trapper's generosity. No one seemed to mind. It was part of a mountain man's livin'. The silver that a trapper earned by his skill and courage seemed to have only one purpose — to buy a few months of gambling, dancing, and riotous living for both himself and his friends before the next trip to the mountains.

If trappers were not interested in making money, why do you think they risked their lives in such a dangerous profession? [*Some points that should be emphasized in discussing this question are: achievement, skill, and adventure. The sense of achievement and pride gained by besting the violence of nature or wild animals or savage Indians must have appealed to these mountain men far more than the silver they received as pay.*]

**K**IT CARSON, Mountain Man, loved to hurl himself into the arms of danger, wrestle with it, and win. And he was not a man who could learn a job, like trapping, then drift along in it, merely doing enough to get by. He strove for excellence in

everything he did. Each trip west taught him new skills — how to build a fort, make snowshoes and canoes, kill and butcher a buffalo, mend a gun, track Indians, bargain with them — and even outmaneuver them when the odds were too heavy against him.

He made mistakes in those early days, but he seldom made the same mistake twice. For example, when he was in charge of a logging camp near the settlements, he neglected to post a horse guard. A war party of fifty Crows took advantage of Kit's carelessness and stole his entire stock. After pursuing the night thieves on foot, firing into their camp, and nearly ending up as a scalp on a warrior's belt, Kit succeeded in recapturing the horses. Then he thought about the mistakes he had made. He should have known better than to let his horses run loose at night, even though it was unlikely the Crows would be so close to the camp during winter. He should have been ready for action at dawn, instead of having to wait to "run (mould) bullets." He should have rushed the Crows, instead of letting them rush him. Even though his men were crack shots and had held their position, they still might have "lost their hair" had their foes succeeded in mounting the stolen horses for a second attack.

Victory had been possible only because two Cheyennes who were with Kit's party had stampeded the horses during the early minutes of the fight; the Crows, discovering they were horseless, fled in panic. The lesson was clear: Indians give way when they begin to lose men, which is natural enough, but they run like sin when they are startled by the loss of their horses. Surprise them! Startle them! Jump them! And victory follows. These simple principles saved Kit's scalp many times in the years to come.

Like most mountain men, Kit dealt with Indians as friends or trading customers whenever possible; and in time, he learned the languages of the Cheyenne, Ute, and Comanche, as well as the sign talk universal among the Plains tribes. In fact, he learned the languages of most of the people he met or with whom he did business. He spoke Spanish as the Mexicans spoke it; French as the French Canadians knew it, and English in the dialect of the mountaineers.

As he added to his skills, he also gained a



reputation for truthfulness and reliability. As biographer Stanley Vestal phrased it: "In the wilds of the mountains, truth was not a matter of conveying impressions. Truth had to be literal, objective, factual; life and death might depend on a misconception. If a man made one false statement, his comrades, his Indian customers, would never trust him again. The clear eyes and clear head . . . of a man who first made sure he was right and then went ahead, these gave Kit Carson the character which made him the power he was among the trappers."

One of the most famous stories of Kit's reliability came in his latter years when he was tracking a band of warring Indians for Major Carleton and the United States Army. One morning, finding the trail fresh, Kit told the Major that he thought they were close to their goal. "We ought to find the Injuns about two o'clock," he said.

Carleton, although impressed with Kit's abilities, found this sort of exact prediction, based upon signs of a trail which the Major could not even see, a bit too much to swallow.

"Bet you a hat we don't!"

"Done," said Kit, who being a true mountain man, could never refuse a wager.

And at precisely two o'clock by the Major's watch, the war party was sighted. Months later, a superb beaver hat arrived at Taos bearing the inscription: "At 2 o'clock: KIT CARSON from MAJOR CARLETON."

### *Concluding Thought*

Skill and character were two of the reasons Kit Carson's fame was so widespread. He became a leader of mountain men, a scout for the famous western explorations of John Frémont, a civilian-soldier in the Mexican War and in the Civil War, an Indian agent, and a scout for the United States Army when war with the Indians became inevitable. To read of his life from boyhood to manhood is to learn of the growth of the West, from its infancy as a wilderness controlled by Mexico to its manhood as settled states and territories of the United States. Kit Carson played an important part in each major development. Next week we'll learn how his fame inspired settlers to chance the unknown and travel through deserts and mountain passes to new homes in the West.

## DURING THE WEEK

If your family has never visited nor lived in the states west of the Mississippi, ask each to find pictures of such geographic wonders as the Rocky Mountains, Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Great Salt Lake, Bryce Canyon, or Yellowstone National Park. Colored slides would also be helpful and could be shown at a scheduled get-together during the week. This will help family members to visualize the vastness and grandeur of the country Kit Carson loved and explored.

The *Atlas Of American History* by Edgar B. Wesley is a valuable reference book for many of the lessons in *The Family Heritage Series*. It is available from most American Opinion Bookstores (\$1.20 paperbound) or from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

## HISTORICAL TIE-IN

Kit Carson was born in Kentucky on December 24, 1809. James Madison was President. The year he was five years old the first account of the Lewis and Clark Expedition was published. He became an apprentice in a saddler's shop in 1824, the year Jedediah Smith discovered South Pass through the Rocky Mountains. Twelve years later, he was organizing trapping expeditions into the mountains while Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and William Travis were fighting Santa Anna at the Alamo. From 1842-48, he served as a guide and scout for the expeditions of Lieutenant John C. Frémont, the time period in which the U.S. formally acquired the Oregon Territory and the Mexican War was fought and won. In 1849 Kit settled in Taos, New Mexico, as a rancher and Indian agent. During the Civil War, 1861-65, he fought as a Union Army colonel, mostly against warring Indians who sought to take advantage of the situation. He died at Fort Lyons, Colorado, on May 23, 1868.

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## The Family Heritage Series

For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

The *Family Heritage Series* is an outstanding series of weekly lessons for the home, written to stimulate interest and spark discussion about the legacy we have received.

The *Family Heritage Series* is for all parents with school-age children. It is sure to be valued by all Americans who participate in its Heritage Hour discussions, and would be especially welcomed as a gift.

The *Family Heritage Series* is published by the Movement To Restore Decency, a project of The John Birch Society. The annual subscription rate is twelve dollars for fifty-two lessons, mailed monthly. Individual lessons may be purchased in any quantity at four copies for one dollar. Address all orders and subscriptions to The John Birch Society, 395 Concord Avenue, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178. Wallis W. Wood, Editor.

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