

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 Sixty

Frémont And Carson

LESSON IDEA

Continuing the study of Kit Carson, to see how stories of his exploits and adventures in the western wilderness encouraged others to settle and tame the frontier.

PREPARATION

Look up the definition and pronunciation of *chapeau*, *chaparral*, and *caballada* — three foreign words used in this lesson which family members may not understand. Review the portion of last week's lesson which discusses Indian warfare.

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LIEUTENANT JOHN FRÉMONT leaned on the rail of the steamer bound for the upper Missouri River and studied the man at his elbow. The stranger was small in stature with brown, curling hair and little or no beard — an unassuming man with clear, steady blue eyes and a direct way of talking. Frémont, an ambitious young Army engineer from the East, needed a guide to lead his party along the Oregon Trail and across the Rocky Mountains. The Westerner offered his services.

"What experience have you had?" Frémont asked cautiously. "Do you know the mountains?"

Kit Carson spat into the river and summed up his fourteen years on the frontier by simply stating that a ten-pronged buck was still a fawn when he had "last sot on a chair!"

Frémont said he would make inquiries, did so, and promptly engaged Kit at a hundred dollars a month — three times the amount that Bent's Fort was paying him for keeping its kitchen supplied with buffalo meat.

The days of the lucrative beaver trade had passed. Since 1838, when high silk hats had come into vogue, replacing beaver *chapeaus*, fur prices had taken a nose dive. Trappers could no longer earn a living at their trade. Most of them were working as guides or buffalo hunters. Going west with Frémont over the Oregon Trail and across the Rockies, a fairly routine trip for a mountain man, was far more to Kit's liking than chasing herds of buffalo on the plains. He had no way of knowing, nor would he have cared, that traveling with the flamboyant Frémont would bring him worldwide fame — or that the written reports of his new employer would create a romantic image of his adventures and of the West that would encourage pioneer families to push across the Mississippi in increasing numbers.

Frémont was what Westerners call a "fool tenderfoot." It was not so much his Army training that caused problems, but his swashbuckling romanticism — his enthusiasm for meeting an Indian war party head-on, for example, if it crossed his path. Yet he was an excellent leader — a man willing to work harder than any in his party and one whose courage was unsurpassed. Because of these qualities, Kit was willing to rescue the "fool tenderfoot" whenever the need arose.

FRÉMONT AND CARSON ultimately teamed up for three western expeditions. After each, Frémont wrote a report which not only was factual and accurate in detail but also captured the color and adventure of the awesome plains and moun-

tains, and of Kit Carson's heroism as an Indian fighter, hunter, tracker, and trader. The first report excited the country's interest in the rich lands of Oregon; the second advertised the wares of California and Utah. In fact, it was Frémont's description of the "good soil and good grass adapted to civilized settlements" east of the Salt Lake that attracted the attention of Brigham Young and set the Mormon caravans moving west.

A third trip into the southern regions of the great Southwest helped ignite the war with Mexico in 1846; and, for a time, Frémont-Carson and Company were fighting both Mexicans and Indians.

By the time the war ended in 1848 and Frémont had publicized all of the sights and scenes and adventures of the new territory which now belonged to the United States, Kit had acquired a reputation for daring feats which had made him a hero of the West wherever newspapers were read. Carson's feats so stirred the imagination of Lieutenant G. Douglas Brewerton, a veteran of the Mexican War, for example, that he pictured the celebrated mountaineer as "over six feet high — a sort of Modern Hercules in his build — with an enormous beard, and a voice like a roused lion." An accurate image, perhaps, of Kit's character, but hardly of his physique.

How do you think fame affected Kit's behavior? How would you have reacted to such an avalanche of publicity? [*Discuss the effects that fame has on the behavior of politicians, entertainers, or successful business men. Point out some of the character traits and values that help keep some persons from becoming insufferable egomaniacs when success and fame come their way.*] In the spring of 1848, Lieutenant Brewerton had a chance to travel with Kit Carson from Monterey, California, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. The account he gives us of that cross-country voyage tells us a great deal about Kit and about life in the Southwest at the time — just one year before the great Gold Rush.

Describing the daily life on the trail through the Mohave Desert and along the Spanish Trail, Brewerton tells us:

"When the hour of our departure from camp had nearly arrived, Kit would arise from his blanket and cry 'Catch up'; two words which in mountain parlance mean, prepare to start; and these words once uttered, the sooner a man got

ready the better. Kit waited for nobody

"Carson while traveling, scarcely spoke; his keen eye was continually examining the country, and his whole manner was that of a man deeply impressed with a sense of responsibility. We ate but twice a day, and then our food was so coarse and scanty, that it was not a pleasure, but a necessity.

"During this journey I often watched with great curiosity Carson's preparations for the night. A braver man than Kit perhaps never lived, in fact I doubt if he ever knew what fear was, but with all this he exercised great caution. While arranging his bed, his saddle, which he always used as a pillow, was disposed in such a manner as to form a barricade for his head; his pistols, half cocked, were laid above it, and his trusty rifle reposed beneath the blanket by his side, where it was not only ready for instant use, but perfectly protected from the damp. Except now and then to light his pipe, you never caught Kit exposing himself to the full glare of the camp fire. He knew too well the treacherous character of the tribes among whom we were traveling; he had seen men killed at night by an unseen foe, who, veiled in darkness, stood in perfect security while he marked and shot down the mountaineer clearly seen by the firelight"

BUT IT IS Brewerton's description of their "Indian trouble" in the beautiful plains known as Taos Valley that gives us the clearest picture of Kit's resourcefulness and courage in the face of certain death: "We had scarcely gone a day's journey," Brewerton writes, "before we discovered

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

Kit Carson: Boy Trapper by Augusta Stevenson is a fast-moving story of the boyhood of this famous trapper and scout which will interest children as young as six and as old as twelve. A chapter per night can be read to younger children; beginning readers will want to peruse the book by themselves. The story of young Kit's encounter with the bully Zeke Hicks and how Zeke, seeking revenge, caused Kit to discover the presence of Indians and warn the men at Fort Hempstead is only one of many exciting episodes related by Mrs. Stevenson.

Kit Carson is available, \$2.95 hardbound, from most American Opinion Bookstores, or from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

a great increase in the amount of 'Indian sign,' and also a change in its appearance

"'Look here,' said Kit, as he dismounted from his mule, and stopped to examine the trail; 'the Indians have passed across our road since sun-up, and they are a war-party, too; no signs of lodge-poles, and no colt tracks; they are no friends, neither; here's a feather that some of them has dropped. We'll have trouble yet, if we don't keep a bright lookout.'"

After two or three alarms, which resulted in nothing serious, the party was within eighteen miles of the nearest New Mexican settlement. Yet it was dangerous country, where both Utes and Apaches were still on the prowl.

"I was just beginning to feel a little relieved from the anxious watchfulness of the last few days," says Brewerton, "when Carson, who had been looking keenly ahead, interrupted my musings, by exclaiming: 'Look at that Indian village; we have stumbled upon the rascals, after all.' It was but too true — a sudden turning of the trail had brought us full in view of nearly two hundred lodges, which were located upon a rising ground some half a mile distant to the right of our trail Hemmed in as we were upon either hand by a chain of hills and mountains, we had no resource but to keep straight forward on our course, in the expectation that . . . we might possibly slip by unperceived. But our hope was a vain one; we had already been observed, and ere we had gone a hundred yards, a warrior came dashing out from their town, and, putting his horse to its speed, rode rapidly up to Carson and myself; he was a finely formed savage, mounted upon a noble horse, and his fresh paint and gaudy equipments looked anything but peaceful Kit, who had been regarding him intently, but without speaking, now turned to me, and said: 'I will speak to this warrior in Eutaw, and if he understands me it will prove that he belongs to a friendly tribe; but if he does not, we may know to the contrary, and must do the best we can; but from his paint and his manner I expect it will end in a fight anyway.'

"Kit then turned to the Indian . . . and asked him in the Eutaw tongue, 'Who are you?' The savage stared at us for a moment; then, putting a finger into either ear, shook his head slowly from side to side. 'I knew it,' said Kit; 'it is just as I

thought, and we are in for it at last. Look here, Thomas!' he added (calling to an old mountain man) — 'get the mules together, and drive them up to that little patch of *chaparral*, while we follow with the Indian.' Carson then requested me in a whisper to drop behind the savage . . . and be ready to shoot him at a moment's warning, if necessity required We had advanced thus but a short distance, when Carson (who from time to time had been glancing backward over his shoulder) reined in his mule until we again rode side-by-side. While stooping, as if to adjust his saddle, he said, in too low a tone to reach any ears but mine: 'Look back, but express no surprise.' I did so, and . . . saw about a hundred and fifty warriors, finely mounted, and painted for war, with their long hair streaming in the wind, charging down upon us, shaking their lances and brandishing their spears as they came on.

"By this time we had reached the timber . . . and Kit, springing from his mule, called out to the men: 'Now, boys, dismount, tie up your riding mules; those of you who have guns, get around the *caballada*, and look out for the Indians'

"The Indians pressed closely in, yelling, aiming their spears, and drawing their bows Carson . . . was now so entirely changed that he looked like a different man; his eye fairly flashed, and his rifle was grasped with all the energy of an iron will.

"'There,' cried he, addressing the savages, 'is our line; cross it if you dare, and we begin to shoot. You ask us to let you in, but you don't come unless you ride over us. You say you are friends, but you don't act like it. No, you don't deceive us, we know you too well; so stand back, or your lives are in danger.'

"It was a bold thing in him to talk thus to these blood-thirsty rascals; but a crisis had arrived in which boldness alone could save us, and he knew it. They had five men to our one; our ammunition was reduced to three rounds per man, and resistance would have been momentary; but among our band the Indians must have recognized mountain men, who would have fought to the last, and they knew from sad experience that the trapper's rifle rarely missed its aim. Our animals, moreover, worn out as they were, would have been scarcely worth fighting for, and our scalps a dear bargain.

"Our assailants were evidently undecided, and this indecision saved us; for just as they seemed preparing for open hostilities . . . a runner . . . came galloping in from the direction of the settlements, bringing information of evident importance. After a moment's consultation with this new arrival, the chief whistled shrilly, and the warriors fell back. Carson's quick eye had already detected their confusion, and turning to his men, he called out, 'Now, boys, we have a chance; jump into your saddles, get the loose animals before you, and then handle your rifles, and if these fellows interfere with us we'll make a running fight of it.'

"In an instant each man was in his saddle, and with the *caballada* in front we retired slowly; facing about from time to time, to observe the movements of our enemies, who followed on, but finally left us and disappeared in the direction of the village."

Apparently the Indian runner had brought news that a posse from the settlements was on its way, seeking revenge for previous killings or thievery; and this news added to Kit's bold challenge was enough to create the confusion and indecision that permitted their escape. A leader who had never learned the thinking patterns of his enemy would never have known how to take advantage of that moment of indecision; a man less brave – or more foolhardy – might have emptied his gun on the nearest target, which would surely have ended in a massacre for his party.

Imagine yourself as the leader of a group of thirty men, trail-weary after a long, hard journey, surrounded by one hundred and fifty Indian warriors circling on their ponies, taunting their prey as a lion teases a rabbit before the kill – fierce, muscular warriors, able to hurl a spear into your heart or shoot an arrow into your neck faster than you can reload for a second shot. Would you have stood as Kit did, defiant and strong, daring your enemy to attack? Why do you suppose he acted as he did? [*Discuss Kit's courage. Emphasize his caution, too, and his preparedness. Remind family members of the trappers' psychology of Indian warfare, explained in Lesson #59, and show how it applied to this incident.*]

Concluding Thought

Men like Kit Carson made it possible for the

United States to expand its frontiers to the Pacific Ocean. Others, less daring, less adventurous, would have sat forever on the borders of the wilderness and never ventured to explore it or tame it. But the destiny of the mountain men, those who could not be happy unless they were pushing on to the next mountain or valley, was to blaze the trails, to round off the sharpest corners of the wilderness, and to lead others into new lands.

DURING THE WEEK

Continue the project suggested last week, collecting pictures of the old West, the Indian tribes, and pioneers. Suggest that family members look up information on wagon trains, in general, and the Conestoga wagon, in particular.

The Family Heritage Series

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