

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.

* * * * *

KIT 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.

KIT 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.

