

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.

