

CARSON, CHRISTOPHER HOUSTON (KIT)

(1809–1868)

Christopher Houston (Kit) Carson, frontiersman, son of Lindsey and Rebecca (Robinson) Carson, was born on December 24, 1809, in Madison County, Kentucky. The family moved in 1811 to Howard County, Missouri, where Kit grew up illiterate. He ran away to Santa Fe in 1826, learned Spanish, and trapped from Taos to California and back in 1829–31. He became a veteran mountain man before he was twenty-one. As a free trapper for many different companies during the next ten years, he led an arduous life and became familiar with a vast area only partly within the United States. In 1842, after eight months as hunter for Bent's Fort in what is now Colorado, he visited relatives in Missouri.

Carson was guide and hunter for John C. Frémont's first three explorations between 1842 and 1846 and became a national hero through Frémont's published reports. Carson's exploits in the Mexican War and subsequent overland transcontinental journeys with Edward F. Beale and George D. Brewerton caused him to be lionized in Washington, D.C. In 1854 he was appointed Indian agent at Taos, New Mexico, and learned to sign his name, C. Carson. In 1856 he dictated his concise and factual memoirs to his secretary, John Mostin.

Though Carson's knowledge of Indian languages and customs made him an effective agent, he resigned his agency in 1861 and became colonel of the First New Mexico Volunteers. He fought the Confederates at the battle of Valverde in 1862. In 1863–64, under orders from Gen. James H. Carleton, Carson conducted a successful campaign against the Navajos but was not in charge of the "Long Walk," which transferred them to a reservation at the Bosque Redondo.

Carson was brevetted brigadier general of volunteers and was in command at Fort Garland, Colorado, in 1866–67. He resigned his commission, moved his family to Boggsville, Colorado, and became Indian agent for Colorado Territory in November 1867. Although seriously ill, he conducted a Ute delegation to Washington, D.C., early in 1868. He died at Fort Lyons, Colorado, from an aneurysm of the aorta on May 23, 1868.

From about 1836 to 1840 Carson was married to an Arapaho, Waanibe, by whom he had two daughters. In 1841 he married a Cheyenne, who soon divorced him. In February 1843,

after conversion to Catholicism, Carson married Josefa Jaramillo in Taos, and by her he had seven children, of whom four left descendants. The couple also adopted a Navajo orphan. Josefa died after childbirth in April of 1868. Kit and Josefa were first buried in Boggsville in the Colorado Territory. Their remains were moved to Taos in 1869, as Carson's will stipulated.

In Texas history Carson was connected with an international border incident in 1843. He made a hazardous ride from what is now Kansas to Taos and back in an effort to secure aid for a wagon train, which was ultimately saved by the intervention of United States Dragoons. A second Texas adventure was Carson's fight at the first battle of Adobe Walls on November 25, 1864, against a large number of Kiowa's and Comanche's. Aided by two howitzers, Carson made a demonstration of force that may have helped to produce a peace treaty in 1865.

As trapper, explorer, Indian agent, and soldier, Carson fought hostile Indians innumerable times. He also had a variety of peaceable relations with friendly Indians and treated Indians as equals. Myth-makers in his own time made Carson a superhero by exaggerating his Indian fighting. Later myth-makers have tried to make him a super villain by the same process.

Carson was of short stature and unimpressive demeanor and was extraordinary in his willingness to volunteer for what he believed to be the common good. Although fearless, he had enough caution to survive. He was not a natural leader but acted as difficult circumstances demanded, though he remained modest and unspoiled by adulation. Kit Carson is one of the most deservedly durable of American heroes.

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Harvey L. Carter