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Soldier, Mason, Nestor ...

KIT CARSON, GUIDE TO THE WEST

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Carson City, Nevada, is the capital of the state of Nevada, and was named after Christopher (Kit) Carson, as is Carson Masonic Lodge No. 1, A.F. & A.M. Kit Carson was born in Madison County, Kentucky, on Christmas Eve of 1809, nine months after the birth of Abraham Lincoln in Hardin County in the same state. To doubt the impact of these men on the history of our nation is to consign discretion to the winds. Neither figure was ever an ordinary person: Abe, the tall, gaunt rail-splitter, had no resemblance to Kit, who was small in stature, but built compact for action. If it can be said that Lincoln saved the Union, then surely it must be conceded that Carson did more to save the West than any other single man.

The wisdom and pointed humor of Lincoln will live as long as there is appreciation for candor. Carson, known by his contemporaries as "Nestor" of the Rocky Mountains, came in full favor at a time when to make the wrong move in the West was fatal. The title "Nestor" referred to the oldest and wisest of the Greek heroes of the Trojan War. The name was justified by the fact that Carson had a vast knowledge of Indian life and personality in both war and peace. He knew the safest trails for wagon trains. As an interpreter, teamster, and guide to emigrants and settlers in the West, his services were indispensable. Throughout the young western territories, explorations and campaigns alike owed their successes largely to the advice and experience of Kit Carson, the mild-mannered trail leader.

With a very minor education, Kit's natural abilities were great: He could speak French and Spanish fluently and was proficient in many Indian dialects. He was the undisputed authority on the customs, habits, and manners of Indians in the Middle and Far West. For fifteen years, Carson never slept under a roof or saw the face of a white woman.

Kit's father left Kentucky when the boy was one year old and settled in Howard County, Missouri, near what is now the present city of Fayette. As a boy of fifteen, Kit was apprenticed to a saddler. However, yearning for adventure at the age of seventeen, he ran away and joined a group of hunters and trappers in Santa Fe, New Mexico, becoming a hunter and trapper of wide reputation and experience, second to none. Although Carson was a sober man with a high regard for truth, he made friends easily, and never deserted one. In the rough element of humanity, which was a part of the trapper and fur-trader life, Kit was constantly in contact with low morals and licentiousness, but his strong and honorable character never weakened.

Carson was a strong restraining influence on the warlike Apaches who were led by the famous Geronimo. As Indian Agent at Taos, New Mexico, Carson resolved many disputes and problems, averting violence by adroit maneuvers, common sense, and fairness. Kit loved the outdoors, the beauties of nature, and the free Indian way of life. At Fort Lyon, Colorado, and after the war, Kit was Indian Agent until his death in 1868.

Dewitt C. Peters, Brevet Lieutenant Colonel and Surgeon of the United States Army, was the only person Carson ever personally authorized to write his biography. From this source, the present writer has gained much information and inspiration.

Most frontiersmen, rough, tough, and ready, were a great contrast to the modest, quiet rifleman and guide. Whatever moral stamina he possessed was surely fortified by his philosophy of life, and also strengthened by membership in Montezuma Lodge No. 109, A.F. & A.M., at Santa Fe. The E.A., F.C., and M.M. degrees were conferred between March 29 and December 26, 1854, at Montezuma, under Missouri Grand Lodge Charter. Later, Bent Lodge No. 204 was also chartered by Missouri, in Taos, New Mexico, on December 15, 1859, and Kit demitted to it in April 1860, because he had settled down to ranching 50 miles east of Taos. He was the Lodge's first Junior Warden. When unfortunate circumstances

(territorial upheaval and Indian trouble) forced the surrender of the Lodge's charter, Carson returned to Montezuma Lodge No. 109 and remained a member until his death, May 23, 1868, at Fort Lyon, Colorado.

Moses B. Carson, Kit's brother, was a co-founder (together with two other Masons), of the Missouri Fur Company. Moses B. was initiated, passed, and Raised in Franklin Union Lodge No. 7 in 1826. This must have been a strong influence toward Kit's desire to become a Mason in 1854. Old Franklin, in Howard County, is about 15 miles south of the present city of Fayette.

When Carson went to Taos, he married an Indian girl. Soon after the birth of a daughter, the Indian mother died. Much of Carson's hard-won earnings as a hunter and trapper went to the advancement and education of his daughter, who later married and went to live in California. In 1843, Carson married a second time to a Mexican woman, Senora Josepha Jarimilla; and to this marriage three children were born.

As adventurous explorers were beating Indian paths into wagon routes, John C. Fremont found the services of Kit Carson essential to his success as the "Pathfinder" for the Oregon, California, and Santa Fe trails. For \$100 per month, Kit led the way through dangerous territory, around certain ambush, and over unbeaten paths to Salt Lake, and along the Columbia River to Vancouver Island. Enduring fierce snowstorms over the mountains, one expedition finally reached Sutter's Fort, later the site of the great gold strike of 1849. All the way from the Mississippi Valley to the Pacific Ocean the region was opened for the Westward Movement.

It was at the Old Plaza, in the beautiful little vineyard town of Sonoma, California (about 60 miles northeast of San Francisco), that Colonel John C. Fremont and Kit Carson in 1846, with only 600 men, took down the Mexican flag and proclaimed California territory a part of the United States.

The success of the Fremont expeditions and explorations, and all of the government scientific excursions were, in large measure, due to the sound advice and counsel of the great rifleman, trapper, and guide.

When the Civil War broke out, it was Colonel St. Vrain who helped organize the First New Mexico Cavalry. The same man, Ceran St. Vrain, had requested the Grand Lodge of Missouri to constitute Bent Lodge No. 204 at Taos, New Mexico. St. Vrain became Colonel of the First New Mexico Cavalry, and Carson was the Lieutenant Colonel. As the war moved into its sharpest conflict, Kit became Colonel of the New Mexico Regiment, and in 1865, he was brevetted a Brigadier General for his achievements. Previous to the Civil War, Carson had served as guide for General Kearny when he took possession of New Mexico and Arizona, during the Polk administration.

Kit was a friend and co-partner of Jim Bridger in several hunting and trapping ventures; one of special importance carried him through the Black Hills of South Dakota. In this period of the 1830s, the fur trading and trapping business was at its height.

Before, during, and after the Civil War; the Indian problem made heavy demands on the military potential of the country. Many of the problems were solved by the genius of the Rocky Mountain Nestor with his vast store of Indian lore. In all his contacts with the several nations and tribes, he warned them against intoxicating drink. As Indian Agent, his counsel was most effective. At one time during the Indian wars, he was able to bring about the surrender of 10,000 Indians.

Like Lincoln, Kit could not accept lionization or adulation. As a modest man he threw himself into everything he did, with the force of full conviction, but never in search of personal prestige. Mrs. Fremont was a great admirer of Carson, and when her husband was nominated for president in 1856, she, as well as many others, felt that much credit for Fremont's success was due to the advice and wise counsel of his close associate and fellow commander.

Though this stirring story ends, its spell will never die: The two self-made men, Abe and Kit, both born in Kentucky in 1809, found their places in a destiny that united a shattered union and bound the West to a nation whose potential was later to serve to stabilize the affairs of the whole world. A United Nation, welded together by two great artisans, could well proclaim in the words of the 133rd Psalm, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"