



Kit Carson, man and myth

Christopher “Kit” Carson, is perhaps Taos' most famous and celebrated resident. He was a fur trapper among the earliest Western explorers, a scout during the first mapping of pioneer trails, a cattle and sheep rancher, a transcontinental courier, U.S. Native American agent, and an officer in the United States Army. Yet he was more than any of those things. Some people say he was a hero who was instrumental in opening up the West. Others say he was a rugged frontiersman who understood the ways of Native Americans better than any other Westerner. He was an enigmatic and complex man who participated in, and helped pave the way for, almost all of the major historical events of America’s westward expansion—the expansion that came to be known as Manifest Destiny.



Kit Carson as a young man.

Mountain Man, Husband and Father

Kit Carson was born Christmas Eve, 1809. He was raised in Missouri and apprenticed to a saddle maker at age 14. As he said though, “The business did not suit me, and I concluded to leave...” He ran away at age 16, and he eventually arrived in Taos in 1826. At 19, hiring on with fur trappers in Taos, he became a mountain man. For ten years, he trapped beaver and hunted throughout the West. During this time, he married a young Arapaho woman, with whom he had two daughters, and after her death, he married a Cheyenne woman, but that marriage did not last. In 1843 at the age of thirty-three, he married Josefa Jaramillo, the beautiful fourteen year-old daughter of a prominent Taos family. They moved into the house which is today the Kit Carson Home and Museum. It was their home for the next twenty-five years, where they raised their children, three adopted Native American children and young family members for whom they were guardians. By all accounts, Kit was a loving husband and father, even though his service to his country and the need to provide for his family often kept him away from home.

Fremont's Expeditions

In 1842 John Charles Fremont hired Kit Carson as guide for his first expedition to map the South Pass, and then hired him for his next two expeditions exploring the lands west of the Rocky Mountains. Fremont's written accounts of the expeditions, in which he described Carson's exploits, made Kit a hero of the West. Hack writers used his name in cheap novels depicting him as a larger-than-life warrior who gloried in slaughtering Native Americans and rescuing maidens in distress.

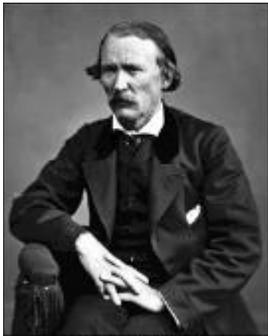
The reality is very different. Carson was a man of extraordinary practical intelligence: confident, decisive, and immensely skillful. He was a keen observer of everything around him. He learned Spanish as a teenager in Taos, French as a trapper, he spoke numerous Native American languages, and he knew the sign language used among

Western tribes. Combined with an innate reserve and lack of pretension, these qualities made him a leader on the trail and a man whom everyone considered to be honest, loyal and brave. Yet despite many talents, he remained illiterate throughout his life, eventually learning only to sign his name, "C. Carson."

Indian Agent and Freemason

In 1854, at the age of forty-four, Carson became the Federal Indian Agent to the Moache Ute, Jicarilla Apache and Taos Pueblo tribes. He worked out of his Taos home and was a trusted and effective agent in what was otherwise a deplorable history of the relationship between the United States government and Native Americans. He earned the name "Father Kit" from the Utes.

While he was an Indian Agent, Carson became a Freemason. He was inducted at the Masonic Lodge in Santa Fe and attended there for many years. Later, he was a charter member of the Bent Lodge formed in Taos in 1860.



Kit Carson, the Statesman

Navajo Campaign

When New Mexico's part in the Civil War concluded, the Commander of U.S. Army forces in New Mexico turned his attention to the problem of raids by Navajos in the Territory. General James Carleton devised a bold yet naive plan to relocate the Navajo people from their homeland to the Bosque Redondo to become farmers. Carleton chose Kit Carson for the assignment. Carson, whose health was declining, wanted nothing more than to stay in Taos and tried to refuse the assignment on two occasions. Carleton, however, would not relent and Carson finally accepted the mission.

Although his orders were to capture women and children and kill all young men, Carson chose to disregard the latter. He ultimately gained the submission of the Navajo by controlling and destroying their crops and orchards.

Carson did not participate when over 8,000 Navajo men, women and children, escorted by U.S. Army troops, were sent to the Bosque Redondo reservation in eastern New Mexico, 400 miles from their homes. Some died on what came to be known as "The Long Walk." To this day, most Navajos consider Carson to be an agent of the near-destruction of their people, but that is not accurate.

Last years

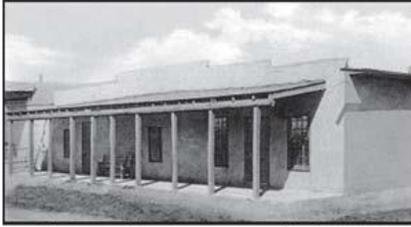
Carson remained an advocate for Native Americans in his later years as he struggled to support his wife Josefa and his still growing family. In 1868 at the age of forty, Josefa died shortly after giving birth to their ninth child. Carson died a month later, of a aortic aneurysm at age fifty-nine.

The Carson's' Home

Although the exact date the Carson home was built is not known, it was probably built around 1825. Carson purchased the house as a wedding present for Josefa in 1843.

They occupied the house from then until 1867, when Carson was assigned as commander of Fort Garland in southern Colorado. The one-story house is in the Spanish Territorial style with adobe walls two feet thick.

The exterior remains today much as it was when the Carsons lived here. Interior walls would have been white washed with a local clay mixed with mica. The rooms were sparsely furnished. Beds (camas) which were made of hides and Navajo blankets were rolled up during the day and used for seating. Other furniture included locally made tables (mesas), chairs (sillas), chests (cajas), and cabinets (alaceños or armarios).



The Carsons' home as it appeared in the 1850s.

The furniture was made out of wood locally sawed and then adzed (primitive planing).

Each room had a fireplace, providing the only heat in a place where winter temperatures can drop well below zero. Cedar, juniper and pinon wood were burned in the fireplaces, as they still are throughout northern New Mexico.

The dirt floors were polished with ox blood and wood ash to keep them hard.

Ceilings were even lower than the current ones and were made of wooden hand-adzed beams (vigas) which were covered by either split cedar boards (rajas) or aspen poles (latillas). Cattails, grasses and sage were then laid on top of that and covered by up to two feet of dirt.

The Courtyard

The courtyard where you enter the museum, was an integral part of the home. Much of life was lived outdoors and was the site of many activities: socializing, working with leather, blacksmithing, laundry, cooking, processing wool and other household activities. It is reported that Indians often camped in the court yard area, while waiting for decisions by Kit, the Indian agent.

The Museum Shop and Bookstore

The Museum Shop and Bookstore area was probably the stables area of the Carson home, although the current building was not erected until the middle of the 20th Century.

Rooms of the House

The first room, containing photos of Carson and his family, was the family sleeping and living room. The fireplace has been reconstructed as it would have been in the mid-1800s. Windows then were quite small, made out of sheets of mica and barred with iron rods. Those early windows provided protection from Indian raids.

The second room was the kitchen. The large window which looks out on the courtyard was originally a door through which the family could pass to use the horno (outdoor oven), well and privy. The fireplace is a reproduction, but frontier cooks would have used similar ones with a double hearth...one side for a hot fire and one side for a low fire.

The final room was the parlor. It was used for entertaining and for overnight guests. Carson used this room as his office when he was Indian Agent of the Territory. In this room, is a Brigadier General's jacket, Carson's saber, his Masonic apron and ring, a spyglass similar to one he used, and a .50 caliber Hawken rifle that is a replica of his rifle. The rifle was made in 1998 from measurements from Carson's own rifle, which is in the Masonic Lodge in Santa Fe.

The Taos Masons of Bent Lodge #42 purchased the home in 1911 for \$2,134. Over the years it has been both a residence and business. It became a museum in 1949. The house was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1963 by the National Park Service. It is still owned by the Masonic Lodge of Taos and is operated by the Kit Carson Home and Museum, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The museum hosts over 20,000 visitors a year. It is the venue for a variety of educational programs that delight young and old, locals and tourists.