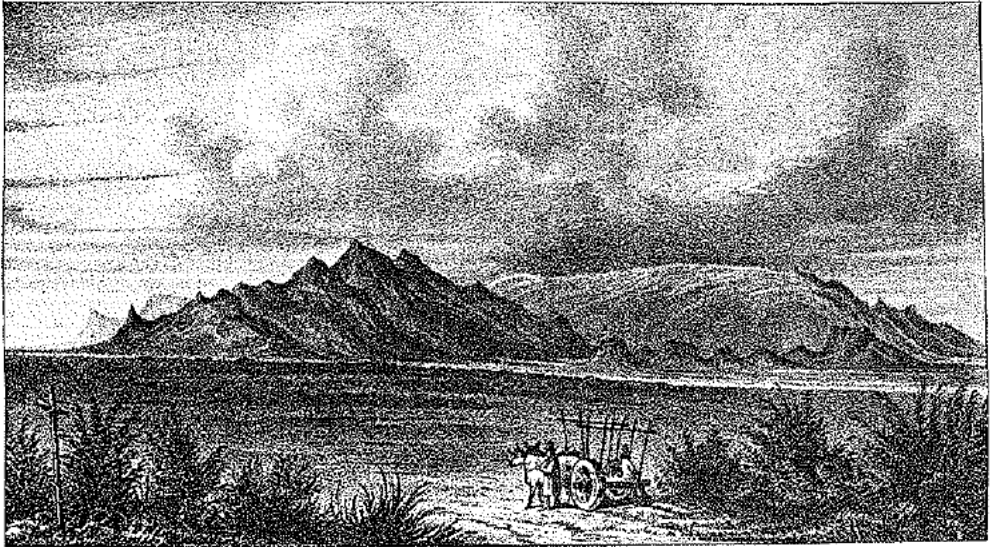


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The Road West

Saga of the 35th Parallel



Bertha S. Dodge

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The Making of a Mountain Man

By the end of the eighteenth century, Imperial Spain was not only losing her preeminence as a world power but at home the stronger powers in Europe had come to look upon her as decadent and a fair spoil. Though the Treaty of Paris (February 10, 1763), which ended the Seven Years War (French and Indian War to Americans), transferred the Louisiana Territory from France to Spain, her grip on it was feeble. By the turn of the century, a world-conquering Bonaparte was forcing return of sovereignty over Louisiana to the French under the Second Treaty of Ildefonso. France, in turn, agreed that should she ever be moved to divest herself again of the Territory, it should be to no other power but Spain. Within three years of that agreement, a financially stripped and forsworn Bonaparte was selling Louisiana to the United States.

Naturally, Spaniards, those overseas even more than those at home, were infuriated by the bad faith this sale demonstrated—the fury being directed especially toward the purchasers. But what had they purchased? No one knew precisely what that Louisiana Territory included. No one had surveyed it and drawn lines on a map indicating where it ended and New Mexico Territory began.

So exploring parties went forth to find the answers. There was the U.S. government-sponsored expedition of 1804–6, directed to locate the source of the Missouri River. There was also an expedition, sent out in 1806 by General Wilkinson of dubious fame, under Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike, to search out the sources of the Red and Arkansas rivers. This latter exploration of the more southerly areas ended in Pike's running afoul of Spanish

authorities in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Of course those authorities knew no better than their United States counterparts just where the line of demarcation should run. They were, in any case, growing suspicious of the motives of any U.S. explorer and, more particularly, of the sponsors of this one, who, they feared, might be scheming toward a takeover of all Mexico. Thus when forced by the bitter cold of winter in the Sangre de Cristo mountains to seek refuge in Santa Fe, Lt. Pike was immediately seized, though politely so, marched south into Mexico, then forced to abandon his expedition altogether and return to the United States. Two nations, which miles of separation had previously kept in reasonably friendly attitudes, now were looking at one another across the vague borders of the Louisiana Territory with suspicions that were not completely unjustified.

By 1821, Mexico, without the U.S. aid that authorities in Spain had long been anticipating, broke away from Spain and declared her independence, thereby assuming formal control of New Mexico, which she intended to hold inviolate from the grasp of ambitious adventurers from the east and north. So far these adventurers had, for all practical purposes, been confined to two classes—traders and mountain men. Traders were bound to be the least menacing to authorities in Santa Fe since they could not conduct much profitable trade in secret. Beside, the wares they brought at their own risk to such isolated communities must have been something of a compensation for their unwanted presence. A mountain man, on the other hand, killed fur-bearing animals, took the furs, and offered little in return save the reckless spending of wages in the night spots of towns like Santa Fe. And always there was the menace of an attempt at takeover by the government in Washington.

For twenty-five years, the Mexican government tried to enforce strict rules against the infiltration of her remote northernmost province by adventurers from the United States who, if encountered, could count upon less friendly treatment than Lt. Pike had received. So it is small wonder that for this period, El Morro shows only a single, now nearly effaced inscription—"O.R. 1836."

Who was O.R.? A trader? A mountain man? What nationality and where from? Surely, while New Mexico remained a territorial possession of old Mexico, no non-Mexican mountain man who knew what was good for him—and only a mountain man who knew

what was good for him could long survive—would have left his name on El Morro, thereby announcing to the world he was a trespasser. The trapping and hunting on which he depended for food, clothes, excitement, and income was strictly illegal for any United States citizen. Even had he been one of the rare mountain men who were literate, he must have known better than to defy the authorities by leaving a damning confession upon a rock to which Mexican officials had access.

This is not to suggest that mountain men did not continue to take the thirty-fifth parallel route if they thought there might be some profit in it for them. Having explored the unexplored western wildernesses, they felt them to be theirs to use as they saw fit. The spoils should come to the men who took the risks and defied death there in any number of forms. Only an unusually intelligent, brave, cautious, self-reliant man could hope to survive long at their trade. Such a man cared little about restraints imposed from the outside, whatever the government imposing them. Living from one day to the next, mountain men concerned themselves very little with what another month or year might bring. Immortality of any kind, notably that to be achieved by a few scratches on soft sandstone, would look to them as silly as it must be valueless.

Though most mountain men seem to have gotten along quite well in their particular limited world without reading or writing skills, their lack is our real loss. If only some of them had sent letters to distant friends telling of their unique kind of life and if only a few such letters might have survived! If only, like Juan de Oñate, they had recorded their passing on Inscription Rock—"Christopher Carson passed this way bearing dispatches from California to Washington"—but such "if only's" are of small use now. Today we must rely upon legends or upon the comments of more literate friends and admirers to picture the kind of life that was theirs.

The name of that most famous of mountain men, "C. Carson 1863," was actually once seen upon the rock, though today it cannot be found. Who put it there? Who later removed it? And when, and why? And why that special year when Kit must have passed that way numberless times both earlier and later, including those many dispatch-bearing missions? Perhaps his first visit to the rock was in 1829 when the twenty-five-year-old Kit left Taos with a group of men, mostly traders, headed for California on an expedition that

the Mexican authorities, had it been brought to their attention, would have sternly forbidden.

It might be that Kit himself made that inscription on the rock, for by 1863 he had learned to write his name at least, as it is known that he did before his death in 1868. Or perhaps his name was placed there by one of the soldiers serving under Kit during his years of army service when he finally attained the rank of brigadier general. Perhaps it was cut by a friend who thought that among the names of so many brave and adventurous men, Kit Carson's should not be lacking.

Kit had a host of such admirers that included both his illiterate one-time mountain-men companions and highly literate officers like the Lt. Beale, whose name, undated and in modest script, still survives on a protected area of the rock. In 1863, however, Lt. Beale could have cut no inscription there for at that date he was, by President Lincoln's special request, acting as surveyor-general for California and Nevada.

Always, since chance had first thrown him into Kit's company, Beale had cherished the deepest admiration and the warmest affections for this man, "who had not the advantage of an education but was wise as a beaver." It would be Ned Beale who would rise swiftly and indignantly in Kit's defense when, in 1871, with Kit no longer able to defend himself (had he been of a kind to think it worth the trouble), Joaquin Miller published a smart-alecky poem that Beale felt depicted Kit Carson as a coarse border ruffian.

"Dear old Kit," Beale wrote:

Looking back through the misty years, I see a man calm, serious, and sweet of temper; a man of very moderate stature, but broad-fronted and elastic, yet by no means robust of frame though gifted with immense endurance and nerves of steel. A head quite remarkable for its full size and very noble forehead, quiet, thoughtful blue eyes, and yellow hair, and very strong jaw. . . . This was the outward shape which enclosed a spirit as high and daring and as noble as ever tenanted the body of man . . .

Oh, Kit, my heart beats quicker even now, when I think of the time twenty-five years ago, when I lay on the burning sands of the great desert, when you had, tenderly as a woman would put her firstborn, laid me, sore from wounds and fever,

on your only blanket. I see the dim lake of waterless mirage. I see waving sands ripple with the faint hot breeze around us, and break upon our scattered saddles. I see the poor mules famishing of thirst, with their tucked flanks, and dim eyes, and hear their plaintive cry go out to the wilderness for help. . . .

Without a thought of ever seeing water again, you poured upon my fevered lips the last drop in camp from your canteen . . . afterwards, on the bloody Gila, where we fought all day and travelled all night, with each man his bit of mule meat and no other food, and when worn from a hurt I could go no further, I begged you to leave me and save yourself. I see you leaning on that long Hawkins gun of yours (mine now) and looking out of those clear blue eyes at me with surprised reproach as one who takes an insult from a friend. And I remember when we lay side by side in the midst of the enemy's camp when discovery was death and you would not take a mean advantage of a sleeping foe. [16]

The "twenty-five years ago" was in 1846, during the Mexican War, when Edward Fitzgerald Beale, twenty-four-year-old alumnus of the United States Naval Institute, came to know Christopher Carson, thirty-seven-year-old graduate of innumerable hunting-trapping expeditions into remote western wilderness. In war, as well as on such expeditions, nerves of steel and inexhaustible endurance counted most and the wisdom of a beaver could far outweigh the knowledge of a genius. Gallantry, of a kind that refused to take advantage of a sleeping foe, which Ned Beale described in *Kit* and which *Kit*, though he was unable to record it, sensed in Ned—this was something extra, something upon which the friendship of a lifetime could be based.

In 1810, Christopher Carson's frontier parents had moved from Kentucky to Franklin, Missouri, half way up the Missouri River from the city of St. Louis to the very little town that was to become Independence. In Franklin, one-year-old Christopher, as well as all his brothers and sisters, would grow up without a chance to master the three R's, without even becoming more than vaguely aware of a need for learning. In any case, for such youngsters no printed tale could possibly have rivaled the excitement of word-of-mouth accounts that passing adventurers from far western mountains told to the young and old alike.

Those fur-laden trappers and hunters, fresh from expeditions to remote areas known to few but themselves, would pass a few days, maybe, in Franklin before moving on downriver to St. Louis. In that Mississippi River metropolis, they'd sell their furs and have themselves a wild and wonderful time with the proceeds. Then they'd start upriver again to head for the mountains, supplied with equipment for the new expedition, purchased, usually, against the income from the next year's furs. It was a life of adventure and freedom and danger.

Kit's father could not have failed to read in his son's eyes the lad's hero worship for these passing mountain men and, fatherlike, he must have become alarmed. No such wild risky life for a son of his! The boy should settle down and learn a steady trade that could support him, and help his family, of course. In a community dependent on horses and mules for any transport away from the river thoroughfare, saddlery was as safe a bet for the future as a filling station or garage now might be. The local saddler, David Workman, was willing to receive Kit as an apprentice, so an agreement was soon drawn up and Kit found himself bound to a trade "that did not suit me."

"Having heard tales of life in the mountains of the West," he later confessed, "I concluded to leave him. He was a good man, and I often recall to mind the kind treatment I received from his hands, but taking into consideration that if I remained with him and served my apprenticeship, I would have to pass my life in labor that was distasteful to me, and being anxious to travel for the purpose of seeing different countries, I concluded to join the first party for the Rocky Mountains." [48]

The first party for the mountains to which Kit, after reaching the decision, could attach himself left the river in early September. Kit was along, though, by the rules of the game, he was legally bound to serve out the apprenticeship in which his father had placed him. His master was equally bound to watch over and provide for the youth entrusted to his care.

The kindness that Kit so long remembered was shown in the advertisement placed by his master in an 1826 issue of *The Missouri Intelligencer*:

Notice: To whom it may concern. That Christopher Carson, a boy about sixteen years old, small of his age, but thickset, light hair, ran away from the subscriber, living in Franklin,

Howard County, Missouri, to whom he had been bound to learn the saddler's trade, on or about the first day of September last. He is supposed to have made his way toward the upper part of the State. All persons are notified not to harbor, support, or subsist said boy, under penalty of law. One cent reward will be given to any person who will bring back said boy. (Signed) David Workman, Franklin, October 6, 1826. [16]

One cent could hardly have been David Workman's estimate of Kit's worth. Nor could it have taken him six weeks to become aware that the lad had left Franklin. Least of all could he have expected that any boy bound for "the upper part of the State" had not in six weeks managed to get himself well beyond the reach of Missouri law. By thus advertising, the master was fulfilling his legal obligations and could smile his kindest smile at the thought of the restless boy happily headed for the land of his dreams.

Three years later, in Mexican Santa Fe and after some kinds of employment that could not have been much more to his taste than saddlery, Kit managed to approach his dreamed-of goal by joining a California-bound expedition under the direction of an experienced fur trapper named Ewing Young. "In those days," Kit later recounted, "licenses were not granted to citizens of the United States to trap within the limits of Mexican territory . . . We travelled in a northerly direction for fifty miles then changed our course to the southwest." [33, 48]

This was typical strategy for the times. During the California-bound trip, which ended with the band's return to Taos in 1830, they crossed through Zuñi and Navajo country. Since Zuñi lies not many miles west of El Morro, it is a safe bet that they paused by the tank to water both horses and mules, not to mention themselves. Without a license for exploration and trapping, even the most literate member of the band would not then have dreamed of adding a damning personal inscription to the roster already on the rock.

"In April, 1830," Kit told of that trip, "we had all safely arrived at Taos. The amount due us was paid, and each of us having several hundred dollars, we passed the time gloriously, spending our money freely, never thinking that our lives were risked in gaining it." Kit was learning that it was routine for most mountain men to risk their lives in gaining money which they would spend riotously.

During the following decade, Kit, now a full-fledged mountain

man, built himself a formidable reputation both as a hunter (notably to supply meat to Bent's Fort, a private establishment on the Arkansas River) and as a trader (notably for the Bents of Bent's Fort and of St. Louis, Missouri). He also managed to fall in love, twice. The first time was with a girl of a proud St. Louis French family, which sternly forbade marriage with a man who not only had taken a now deceased Indian squaw to wife, but who published his unfortunate union through a half-breed daughter he would not dream of disowning.

The second time, deeply in love with the aristocratic Mexican belle María Josefa Jaramillo, Kit was determined not to let the child stand permanently in the way of his own romance. She was not, however, to be denied loving care or the best upbringing and education available. Certainly she was not to grow up among her mother's people to become the squaw of some wild Indian. The way out would be to persuade one of his Missouri relatives to take the child into her home and keep her there until she was old enough to be received into a proper St. Louis convent school. A niece in Howard County, Missouri, agreed to this and Kit heaved a sigh of relief that his little Adaline would now have a far better chance of growing up happily than in a community like Taos that already had no real place for its too many half-breeds.

In 1842, when Kit had made that return journey to Franklin and completed the family arrangement, he decided to go on downriver to visit St. Louis, center of the fur trade and of fur traders. Ten days of that metropolis, which seemed overcrowded and too noisy, sufficed for the mountain man. He was soon again bound upriver on a boat headed for Westport Landing, just beyond the western extremity of the state.

As fate would have it, a fellow passenger on that same boat was John Charles Frémont, planning the first of his several western exploring expeditions, one of the earliest government-subsidized explorations of the country lying between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains. To an ambitious twenty-nine-year-old army man hoping to make a name for himself in the strange wild land ahead, the thirty-three-year-old mountain man must have seemed like the answer to a prayer. As homesick Kit spoke knowledgeably about the mountain land toward which Frémont was headed, Frémont listened delightedly. By the time the boat reached Westport, in May 1842, Kit had been persuaded to serve Frémont

for \$100 a month, just about three times the amount the Bents had been paying him.

Perhaps the respectable government employment helped convince María Josefa's critical parents that the now Catholic Kit Carson might not be an unacceptable husband for their daughter. Early in 1843, Kit and Josefa were married. They would establish a good home and raise eight children—but Kit's growing reputation made it difficult for him to settle down near Taos to the uninterrupted life of a family man and rancher.