

KIT CARSON

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

WHEN John C. Frémont, the Great Pathfinder of American history, was preparing for his first expedition in 1842, he looked around for a likely guide. One Kit Carson of whom he had never heard applied for a job. Frémont asked him if he had had any experience as a Rocky Mountain guide. Kit then made his classic reply. "Reckon so," he said as he spat a full twenty feet. "A ten-prong buck warn't done sucking when I last sit on a chair."

It was true. No man, not even Dan'l Boone, was on the move so continuously as Kit Carson. As early as 1830 the Rockies, the Columbia River and the Pacific shore were old stuff to him. His ability to go anywhere without a compass and to come out where he had planned was said never to have been equaled. The record would indicate that he was the greatest Pathfinder of them all, but he had no object in his roving other than to allay his restlessness. Otherwise, he would loom much larger in sober American history, instead of being

relegated to folklore and frontier literature.

A small man physically, he was five feet six inches and never weighed more than 160 pounds, all of which was steel spring. The man was almost indestructible. He was perhaps the softest spoken and most modest of all the boys who took on grizzly bears hand-to-hand, fought Comanches to a standstill and could exist for days merely by chewing his buckskin leggings.

Kit was born in Kentucky in 1809 and moved to Missouri with his family. Apprenticed to a saddler, he immediately ran away and was soon acting as hunter and guard for a wagon train trading into Mexico. He got his first hostile Indian when he was sixteen by drilling him through the head at 75 yards. He went out with several trapping expeditions for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, always returning to Taos, which he liked to call his home even if he was seldom there.

The first trip with Frémont wasn't very exciting, but there was

plenty doing on the others. At Klamath Lake in the Oregon country, the Frémont party was surrounded by hostile Modocs. Kit crawled on his belly out onto the vast lava beds, alone, and picked off a Modoc here and there until the red men thought they were trying to fight a devil, and went away. Kit led his party into California. Here a band of thirty redskins ran off with a number of horses belonging to the party. With a man named Godey, Kit followed the thieves, finding them encamped in the Sierras. Kit and Godey proceeded to attack the thirty Indians and routed them, killing four and taking the scalps for proof. They also retrieved the horses.

Then the Mexican war broke out. Apparently without orders, Kit marched alone one night on the Spanish fort at the Golden Gate. He had a mess of common rat-tail files in his pocket. With sentries all around him, Kit spiked every gun in the fort and returned to his own camp before daylight. "I reckon," he said, "they won't fire them guns now." It was one of his greatest exploits.

Frémont was often in trouble and was finally cut off from other American troops by a superior force of Mexicans. Taking a Lieu-

tenant Beale with him — "Got to make it legal," he said — Kit crept through the Mexican lines and got word to Commodore Stockton, who sent relief to the Americans. Kit was mentioned in orders again. Stockton converted Frémont's men into a navy battalion of mounted riflemen, and Kit went along. The force sailed for San Diego and Kit put in the worst week of his life, being horribly seasick. He never forgot this voyage and often swore that he would sail no more "so long as mules has got backs."

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By this time the imperial Americans had proclaimed California to be a territory of the United States, and Kit performed the feat that made him a national character. Frémont made him a lieutenant, gave him fifteen picked men, and sent him overland to Washington with dispatches reporting California's capitulation. On September 15, 1846, Kit and his crew rode out of Los Angeles on the 3000-mile trip, much of it through hostile country. Two days out they ran into a large village of Apaches. Kit rode ahead alone, into the village. He spoke to the red men in their own tongue to such good effect that he and his men were

allowed to pass. But a white villain barred the way. He was General Stephen W. Kearny, heading west with an army to subdue California. Word that it was already in American hands did not please him. He forbade Kit to continue to Washington. Kit obeyed but warned the General that the way west was full of danger just then. Unheeding, Kearny ordered the march. Fifty miles from San Diego they ran into an ambush. Kit had a horse shot from under him, Kearny himself was twice wounded, and forty Americans were killed.

But the army got through, and now, with both Kearny and Frémont on the glory ground, Kit was permitted to start for Washington again. This time he made it with great speed and delivered the dispatches that electrified the nation. It was the Lindbergh feat of the day, and Kit Carson's became the front-page name. But the Government didn't treat the hero very well. His army commission had never been confirmed and he found he had no pay coming for having risked his life continuously and also for having performed a feat that few Americans could have accomplished. Fed up with army and political knavery, he turned to ranching. It was altogether too quiet. He up and bought more

than a thousand sheep in New Mexico and drove them through bad-Indian country to settlements on the Eastern edge of the Rockies, where he sold the lot. It appears to have been his only business venture. He now hiked over the Rockies to San Francisco, and was feted as a hero in that wild city. He turned to guiding bodies of American troops against marauding Mexicans and Indians, and once led ten men on an attack that routed between 300 and 400 Indians.

When the shot was fired at Sumpter, Kit didn't know where he stood. This war over slavery was something entirely beyond his simple comprehension. But Frémont, now a major general, knew a good man when he saw one. He personally lined Kit up for the North and saw that he was made a brevet brigadier general of volunteers. It was a notable appointment. During the next seven years Kit led his troops against Indians who saw the Civil War as a time to exterminate the palefaces. He held them in check, often cracking down on them hard, and fought some of the fiercest guerrilla warfare this country has ever seen. They managed to get General Carson into gold braid for a few days, but he presently turned up in his old buckskin togs and wore them until

the end. All the fighting was just good fun to him, compared with learning to write his name, which he thought rather foolish but finally accomplished. A number of historians have said in print that Carson's work on the frontier during the Civil War was one of the most necessary campaigns of the time, and brilliantly conducted.

He continued his efforts at subduing the wild lands until 1867. Then, tired and broken by more hardships than most men live through, he resigned. The last of his three wives was dead. Kit went to Fort Lyon and the soldiers there were happy to give the old hero what he asked for. It wasn't much: a bed of buffalo robes on the floor of a house in Officers' Row. He made his will and asked to be buried in Taos. He was really ill. The post doctor forbade him his pipe and put him on a diet. Kit grumbled no end about a man not having his pipe, and on May 23, 1868, he could stand it no longer. He lay on

his buffalo robes and said: "Bring me some fust-rate doin's. Bring me a buffalo steak, a bowl of coffee, and my pipe." The Army doctor warned Kit that such a meal would kill him. "Don't matter," said Kit. He ate two pounds of steak, drank a quart of coffee and smoked his pipe. He allowed he felt a heap better, and then he turned over and died very quietly. He was buried with full military honors and his body taken to Taos.

Men who knew him only by reputation were astonished that such a daring man should have died with his boots off. Those who had ranged and soldiered with him were not. They said Kit was too tough to be killed; he simply had to wear out. And that's what he did, aged almost fifty-nine, and wrapped in buffalo robes, and he went directly into more American legends and dime novels than any man except Jesse James and Dan'l Boone, who had been Kit's grandfather.

THE FEDERAL FOOD-STAMP PLAN

BY DON WHARTON

IN fifty American cities a poor man's relief dollar will buy a dollar's worth of staple groceries plus fifty cents' worth of eggs, butter, pork, flour, fruits and vegetables. The half-dollar food bonus enables the relief family to eat the nation's surplus foods rather than watch them rot or be burned or dumped into rivers. This is the Federal food-stamp plan which most of us have heard about and have not fully understood. By June the plan will cover 125 cities. Nearly 2,000,000 persons will be using the stamps.

Everybody likes the stamp plan, I judge after traveling 4000 miles, visiting eight cities in the South, Southwest, Middle West and East. Relievers like it because it means more food, better food. Farmers like it because it means larger markets and protects prices from being wrecked by surpluses. To grocers, wholesale and retail, it means more customers, more business, greater profits. Bankers, chamber of commerce secretaries, and businessmen in general are glad to

see more money circulating in their towns. Politicians know it pleases their constituents and means their poor are better fed without extra cost to their own communities. Social workers and doctors approve because it means better diet for the poor, hence better health and eventually decreased costs of charitable medicine. Railroad men like it because it means more freight traffic. New Dealers, conservative Democrats, Republicans all like the plan and welcome its gradual displacement of the old direct-purchase plan of the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation. Under the old plan the FSCC, on finding that a surplus of grapefruit, say, was wrecking the market, bought carloads and shipped them to local relief agencies which distributed the fruit to the poor. Under the stamp plan the FSCC buys nothing. The Secretary of Agriculture simply designates grapefruit as a surplus commodity.

The list varies from time to time, but grapefruit, butter, raisins, rice, lard, pork, corn meal,