

CARSON'S "FIRST INDIAN."



KIT CARSON.

Mexico, I have chosen for my sketch Kit's first shot at an Indian.

That portion of the great central plains of Kansas which radiates from the Pawnee Fork as its center, including the bend of the Arkansas, where that river makes a sudden sweep to the

**I**HAVE been requested by several parties to offer something of Kit Carson's early days on the Plains. Having been intimate with that famous man during the declining years of his eventful life, and having heard from his own lips many of the adventures of his youth, while sitting around the camp-fire on several little "outings" with him and Maxwell

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southeast, and the beautiful valley of the Walnut,—in all an area of nearly a thousand square miles,—was from time immemorial a sort of debatable ground, occupied by none of the tribes, but claimed by all to hunt in, for it was a famous resort of the buffalo.

None of the various bands of savages had the temerity to attempt its permanent occupancy, for whenever they met there—which was of frequent occurrence—on their annual hunt for their winter's supply of meat, a bloody battle was sure to ensue. The region referred to has perhaps been the scene of more sanguinary conflicts than any other portion of the continent. Particularly was this the case when the Pawnees, who claimed the country, met their hereditary enemies, the Cheyennes.

Through this region, hugging the margin of the silent Arkansas, and running under the very shadow of Pawnee Rock, the old Santa Fé trail wound its course, now the actual road-bed of the Santa Fe Railway,—so closely are the past and present transcontinental highways cemented at this point: one, a mere memory; the other, one of the great railways now spanning the continent.

Who, among the bearded and grizzled old fellows like myself, has forgotten that most exciting

and sensational (at least it was so to my boyish mind) of all the miserably executed illustrations in the geographies of their school-days fifty years ago—"Santa Fe Traders Attacked by Indians"? The picture located the scene of the fight at Pawnee Rock, which formed a sort of a nondescript shadow in the background of a crudely drawn representation of the dangers of the trail.

I witnessed a spirited encounter between a small band of the Cheyennes and Pawnees in the fall of 1867. It occurred on the open prairie, just north of the mouth of the Walnut, about four miles from where the city of Great Bend now stands. Both tribes were hunting the buffalo, and when each by accident discovered the presence of the other, with a demoniacal yell that fairly shook the sand-dunes of the Arkansas they rushed at once into the shock of battle.

The Pawnees were of course friendly to the whites, and had permission from their agent to leave their reservation in the valley of the Neosho, near Council Grove. At that particular time, for a wonder, the Cheyennes too were temporarily at peace with the Government. So I had nothing to do but passively witness the savage combat.

Both bands of the savages soon exhausted their

ammunition, and then the chiefs of the contending factions appealed to me most earnestly to supply them with more, of which there was plenty at Fort Zarah, only half a mile away. I was necessarily forced to remain neutral, but my sympathies were with the "under dog" in the fight, — which happened to be the Cheyennes, whom the Pawnees drove off disgraced and discomfited.

That evening, in a grove of timber on the Walnut, the victors had a grand dance in which scalps, ears and fingers of their enemy, suspended by strings to poles, were important accessories to their weird orgies around the huge camp-fires.

How true it is, as Longfellow declares: "The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts." I remember that map in the geographies of fifty years ago (already referred to) on which was depicted "the Great American Desert," over which I pored in the little log school-house at the cross-roads in the country, near my home in one of the Eastern States. How distinctly I remember seeing Bent's old fort marked on the western edge of the "Desert" on that quaint map. Then, in the "long, long thoughts" of my boyhood's fancy, it seemed to me to be away out on the confines of another world, for then I had never been thirty miles away from the farm on which I was reared.

I have slept under the old fort's hospitable roof many times since, but long before the era of railroads, where, gathered around its huge adobe fireplaces, up whose cavernous throats the yellow flames crackled and roared, were the mighty men of the Ute nation, with Kit Carson, Lucien B. Maxwell, Bent, and other famous characters of the border, conversing in the beautiful but silent sign-language, that is so perfect in its symbolization. Of those who were present then, all but myself are long since dead, and the scenes of those days are only hidden pictures in the storehouse of my brain, to be called back in the quiet of the gloaming, with their host of accompanying pleasant memories of a shadowy past.

In my boyhood days I honestly believed that Kit Carson was at least eight feet tall; that he always dressed in the traditional buckskin, fringed at the seams, and beaded and "porcupined" all over; that he carried innumerable eleven-inch bowie-knives, his rifle of huge dimensions—so large and heavy that, like Warwick's sword, no ordinary man could even lift it. I believed his regular meal to be an entire buffalo, which he raised with both hands to his mouth, and picked its immense bones as easily as the average mortal does a chicken's wing, and that he drank out of

nothing smaller than a river. Boys, probably by the thousands, had the same "long thoughts," for boy-nature is the same everywhere.

Kit Carson was really a man under the average height, rather delicate-looking in physical make-up than otherwise, but in fact, wiry and quick, though cautious, possessing nerves of steel and an imperturbability in the moment of supreme danger that was marvelous to contemplate.

He was fond of cards and horse-racing, a famous rider in his younger days, having entered the lists in many a contest with the Indians, who are generally passionately devoted to trials of speed between rival ponies. I have myself seen, in the long-ago, as many as eight hundred horses bet by contending bands, whose wealth was counted by the number of animals they possessed.

Kit once, years before he became famous, fought a duel, mounted; he escaped with a bullet-wound behind his left ear, the scar of which he carried to his grave, but he winged his equally youthful antagonist in the quarrel.

Kit's nature was composed of the noblest of attributes: he was brave, but never reckless like Custer; unselfish, a veritable exponent of Christian altruism; and as true to his friends as steel to the magnet.

He died in 1868, at Fort Lyon, on the Arkansas, while on his way to Fort Harker to make me a long-promised visit. For some time after his passing away he rested peacefully under the gnarled and knotted old cottonwoods which fringe the river—that Nile of America—in the vicinity of Lyon. Later, his remains were moved to Taos, his former New Mexico home, where an appropriate monument was erected over them; in the plaza of quaint and curious Santa Fé, too, there is a massive cenotaph which records his deeds and name.

Kit was born in Kentucky, on the 24th of December, 1809. While a mere infant his parents emigrated to what is now Howard county, Missouri, which at that early date was literally a "howling wilderness" filled with "varmints" of all kinds.

There, as soon as he was big enough to lift a rifle, the old-fashioned patch-and-ball, flint-lock affair, the embryo great frontiersman began to hunt, and by the time he was fifteen he became the most expert shot in the whole settlement. He could hit the eye of a squirrel every time he pulled the trigger, or it didn't count.

At this period, however, his father apprenticed him to a saddler, with whom he worked faithfully

for two years, spending all his leisure moments in the primitive forest, hunting bear, deer, and other large game that abounded there.

In two years more, when Kit had reached the age of seventeen, the trade with Santa Fé began, with its initial point in the hamlet of Old Franklin, in Howard county, near where Kit lived (from which place it did not move to Independence until 1836).

In the late spring of 1826, Col. St. Vrain, a prominent agent of the great fur companies, (a grand old gentleman whom I knew intimately,) arrived at Franklin and made preparations to fit out a large caravan destined for the far-off Rocky Mountains, loaded with goods to be used in trading with the Indians for the skins of the valuable fur-bearing animals of that remote and but little known region.

Kit, as green as any boy of his age who had never been twenty miles from his home, was infatuated by the stories told by the old trappers of the Colonel's outfit, regarding the wonderful game in the land to which they were going, and he was easily persuaded to join the caravan in the capacity of hunter, his prowess with the rifle having reached the ears of the major-domo of the train. Kit ran away from home, I suspect, though he never told me so.

The expedition was composed of twenty-six mule-wagons, some loose stock, and forty-two men. In addition to his employment as hunter, young Kit was to help drive the extra animals, take his turn in standing guard, and make himself generally useful.

The party marched wearily along, day after day, Kit proving his right to the reputation of being a mighty hunter, without any adventure worthy of recording, until they arrived at the Walnut, where they discovered the first signs of Indians. They had halted for that day; the mules were unharnessed, the camp-fires lighted, and the men about to indulge in their over-welcome black coffee, when they were suddenly surprised by half a dozen Pawnees, who, mounted on their ponies, hideously painted and uttering the most diabolical yells, rushed out of the tall grass on the Arkansas bottom, and swinging their buffalo robes attempted to stampede the animals of the caravan.

Every man in the outfit was on his feet in an instant with his rifle in hand, so that all the impudent savages got for their pains were a few harmless shots as they scampered back to the river and over into the sand-hills out of sight.

The next night the caravan camped at the foot

of Pawnee Rock, and of course, after the experience of the afternoon before, every precaution was employed to prevent another surprise. The wagons were formed into a corral, so that the animals might be protected in the event of a prolonged fight with the savages. The guards were instructed to be doubly vigilant, and every man slept with his rifle on his arm, for the old Colonel assured them the savages would never rest content with their defeat on the Walnut, but true to their thieving propensities and their desire for revenge, would seize the first favorable opportunity to renew the attack.

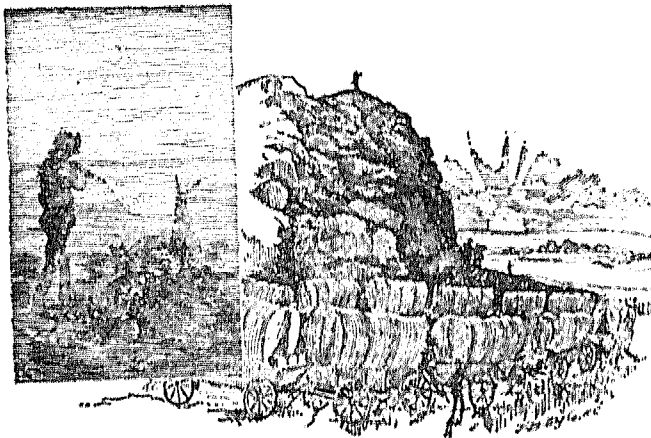
All this was a new and strange experience to young Carson, who had never before seen any Indians except a few friendly Shawnees and Osages. Of the methods and tactics of the wild Plains tribes, he literally knew nothing.

When everything was arranged for the night, Kit was posted as a sentinel immediately in front of the south face of the Rock, nearly two hundred yards from the wagon corral. The other men who were on guard were posted on top, and on the open prairie on either side.

About half-past eleven, as near as he could guess, Kit told me, one of the guards yelled out "Indians!" and ran the mules that were grazing near,

into the corral, while the entire company turned out of their blankets on the report of a rifle on the midnight air coming from the direction of the Rock.

In a few minutes young Kit came running down toward the corral, where the men had collected, and Col. St. Vrain asked him if he had seen any Indians.



THE TRAIN AT PAWNEE ROCK.

“Yes,” replied Kit, “I killed one of the red devils—I saw him fall.”

There was no further disturbance that night; it proved to be a false alarm; so all who were not standing guard that night were soon peacefully sleeping again.

The next morning at the first streak of day, every one was up and anxious to see young Carson's dead Indian. They went out *en masse* to the Rock, when instead of finding a painted Pawnee, they discovered Kit's riding-mule, dead—shot through the head.

The boy felt terribly mortified over his ridiculous blunder, and it was a long time before he heard the last of his midnight shot at his mule.

He explained to me the circumstances: He had not slept any the previous night, and he had watched so earnestly for a chance to kill a Pawnee that he supposed he must have fallen asleep leaning against the face of the Rock; “but I was wide enough awake to hear the cry of ‘Indians!’” said he. “I had picketed my mule about twenty steps from where I stood, and I suppose it had been lying down. All I know is that the first thing I saw after the alarm was something rising up out of the grass. I thought sure it was an Indian; I took aim, and pulled the trigger. It was a center shot; I don't believe that mule kicked once after he was hit!”

In the morning, a few minutes after the men had returned from a visit to Kit's dead mule, a real battle commenced. The Pawnees attacked the camp in earnest, and kept the little outfit

busy all that day, the next night, and till the following night—nearly three whole days, the animals all that time shut up in the corral without food or water.

On the second midnight the men harnessed up and attempted to drive out, but were driven back and had to give it up.

The third night, just before morning, they tried it again, determined to reach the ford at Pawnee Rock to water their animals, or all would perish. It was a little more than ten miles distant from the Rock (and is now within the corporate limits of Larned).

They succeeded in keeping off the savages, and arrived at the ford in comparative safety. The trail at that point crossed the creek in the shape of a horseshoe; or rather, in consequence of a double bend in the stream as it debouches into the Arkansas, the road crossed it twice, as all who have traveled the old Santa Fé trail in the early days will remember.

In making this crooked passage many of the wagons were badly wrecked in the creek, because the mules were terribly thirsty, and their drivers could not control them.

The caravan was hardly "strung out" again on the opposite bank of the Pawnee, when the In-

dians poured a shower of arrows and a volley of bullets from both sides of the trail into the train. But before they could reload or draw their arrows a desperate charge was made among them, headed by the Colonel, and it took only a few minutes to clear out the savages, and then the caravan moved on.

During the whole fight at the Rock and at Pawnee Fork, the party lost four men killed, seven wounded, and eleven mules killed (not including Kit's), and twenty wounded.

From this fight Kit said Pawnee Rock was named.