

# KIT CARSON

and the ROMANCE of the  
OLD SPANISH TRAIL

BY MARC SIMMONS



Photographs of Kit Carson are courtesy of Photo Archives, Palace of the Governors, MNM/DCA. Kit Carson's Hawkin rifle was presented by Carson himself to the Masonic Lodge, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, where it remains in collections. All are arranged on a robe of small beaver skins that was sewn by a member of Kit Carson's family, between 1845 and 1850. It measures 60 x 53 in., and is in collections at the Palace of the Governors/New Mexico History Museum/DCA. Art direction and photograph by Blair Clark.



"A Place Like No Other," a series inspired by the creation of the New Mexico History Museum, is devoted to exploring new Mexico history through new research and recent insights of curators, artists, collections managers, educators, historians, archaeologists, and ethno-historians—work that will inspire lines of inquiry and exhibitions for years to come.

The Old Spanish Trail, at first a trade route between Santa Fe and Los Angeles, grew to be a major link between New Mexico and southern California. For twenty years, and over forbidding lands, pack trains with New Mexico traders made their way to California to trade woolen textiles for horses and mules.

In this article, and through the achievements of Christopher "Kit" Carson, the noted author and historian Marc Simmons sees romance and resilience along a trail where others have seen only harshness, horrors and hardship. Carson traveled portions of the trail many times, aiding travelers, carrying mail, commanding detachment, and accompanying military expeditions, and each time showing courage, competence, and character.

An exhibition on the Old Spanish Trail and those who traveled it will be at the Palace of the Governors, in Santa Fe, in summer 2008.

—Frances Levine, Ph.D., Director  
Palace of the Governors/  
New Mexico History Museum

# IN MY MIND THERE IS NO QUESTION

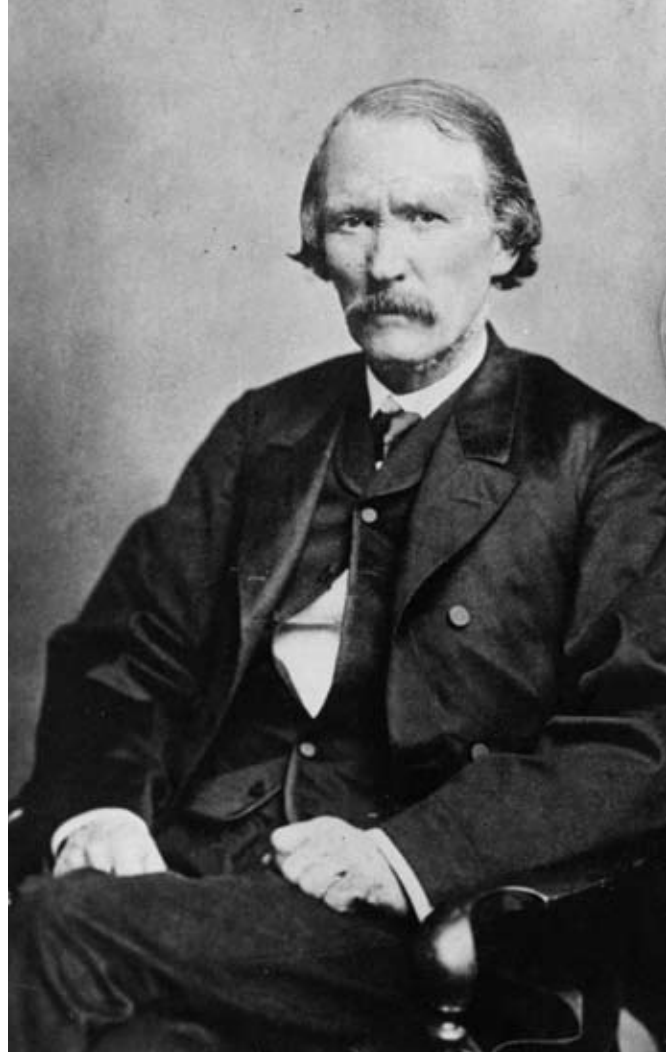
**THAT CHRISTOPHER “KIT” CARSON WAS A ROMANTIC** figure in the history of the American West. Lt. George Brewerton, who accompanied Carson on a trip over the Old Spanish Trail in 1848, says as much in the book he wrote about their experiences, called *Overland with Kit Carson*.

Revisionists of the New Western History school will deny with their last breath that there was any romance associated with Carson’s career. They see him as a racist monster and wanton slayer of Indians, even though that view cannot be supported by historical evidence, much of it presented in the book *Kit Carson: Indian Fighter or Indian Killer?*

On the other hand, there is evidence that gives a favorable picture of Carson and his trail travels, as well as written history that the Old Spanish Trail was filled with romance. As an example, just consider the opening line of LeRoy and Ann Hafen’s classic book, *Old Spanish Trail, Santa Fe to Los Angeles*. They wrote, “The Old Spanish Trail was the longest, crookedest, most arduous pack mule route in the history of America.” As a romantic lead, that sentence is hard to beat. Perhaps that is why it is so often quoted.

Those who already know something about the story of this historic trail might well question why I dare call it romantic. After all, journeys upon it were weighted with danger, hardship, discomfort, human suffering, and tragedy. That sounds like an enumeration in a chamber of horrors, so where is the romance?

The answer is certainly not an easy one. However, remember that people who used the Old Spanish Trail in its heyday in the 1830s and 1840s thrived on challenges and danger. They were lured on by the romance of the open trail, and they craved any new adventure that might lie over the next mountain range or across the next desert. We today are so wedded to ease, convenience, and creature comforts that we can’t understand, or even imagine, how a jaunt over the perilous Old Spanish Trail could possibly be a romantic experience.



**RIGHT:** The last photograph taken of Colonel Kit Carson, Boston, Massachusetts, about March 25, 1868. Photograph by James Wallace Black. Note on back of photograph: “Of all the picture of Carson that I have seen, this is certainly the best one, as I knew him.”—signed Geo. H. Pettis, Providence, R.I., May 10, 1909. Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA) Neg. No. 13307.

When the Hafens were describing the Old Spanish Trail as the longest, crookedest, and most arduous pack mule route, I believe they left out a superlative on their list of adjectives that should have been included. And it is this: the Old Spanish Trail, scenically, was without a doubt the most beautiful of our nation’s nineteenth-century pioneer routes. While that is a subjective judgment on my part, many who have been out on significant portions of the trail would probably agree. The earliest travelers saw this as spectacular and romantic country, its harshness notwithstanding, and much of it remains so to the present day.

My primary focus here is the career of Kit Carson, especially as it relates to the history of the Old Spanish Trail. It just so happens that Carson’s life as a frontiersman is closely tied to both the eastern and western ends of the Old Spanish Trail, that is, to New Mexico and California. So both states have a strong claim on his personal history.

Carson first landed in New Mexico in 1827 as a teenager who had run away from his apprenticeship with the Workman Saddlery in Franklin, Missouri,

at the head of the Santa Fe Trail. He soon gravitated to Taos, a place with which he would remain closely identified for the rest of his life. His ambition was to become a trapper, but as the mountain men would have put it, he needed “to add some tallow,” or gain weight and grow in experience. His break came in 1829, when veteran mountain man Ewing Young allowed Carson to join his company, which was preparing to set out on a two-year trapping expedition to California. By the time Young’s party returned to Taos in 1831, the youth had matured to become a full-fledged member in the fraternity of trappers.

After beaver hunting through the Rockies, Kit Carson brought in furs to sell at Taos during the summer of 1833. There by chance he met Capt. Richard Bland Lee, on leave from the army, who was preparing to carry trade goods to northern Utah and exchange them for furs with trappers working there. Lee needed a few men to act as guides, hunters, and packers, and one of those he engaged was Kit Carson. The party used Abiquiu as a staging and departure point.

In his memoirs, *Kit Carson’s Autobiography*, dictated in 1856, Carson declares, “We followed the Spanish Trail that leads to California till we struck White River.” There is no evidence today that when Captain Lee made his journey in 1833, the route was known as the Spanish Trail. But twenty-three years later, when Carson recorded his memoirs, that term was in common usage.

In his keynote address at Old Spanish Trail’s sixth national conference in 1999, Joseph Sánchez said that in the beginning the New Mexicans called this route El Camino de California (the Road from California), whereas the natives on the West Coast, known as the Californios, spoke of it as El Camino de Santa Fé, or alternately as El Camino de Nuevo México.

Toward the latter 1830s, some of the Californios began referring to this route as El Camino de los Chaguanosos, best translated perhaps as the Horsethief Trail. That certainly has a romantic sound to it. Renegades who were ex-trappers, French Canadians, New Mexicans, and Indians of assorted tribes would ride up the Old Spanish Trail and raid the vast livestock herds of California’s missions and ranchos. Collectively, these rustlers were designated as Chaguanosos,

a word whose origins are obscure. In a chapter in *French Fur Traders and Voyageurs in the American West*, Janet Lecompte, however, plausibly suggests that it derived from the Hispanicized form of Shawnees, which became Shauanoos, and was afterward written Chaguanosos. At this period, displaced Shawnees from the Ohio Valley were engaged in these and other nefarious activities throughout the Far West.

Following his first venture over a part of the Old Spanish Trail with Captain Lee in 1833, Carson did not return for a second ride until early 1844, his new experience providing a further bit of information on the trail’s naming. This was in connection, of course, with the Second Expedition of Exploration by John C. Frémont of the Corps of Topographical Engineers. For this well-planned enterprise, young Frémont hired several experienced frontiersmen as guides, among them Kit Carson; Alexander Godey, of French ancestry from St. Louis; and Lucien Maxwell, a figure whose career was closely linked to Taos.

Launched in 1843, this expedition went first to the Oregon country, then turned south to visit and resupply at Sutter’s Fort in northern California, which was then Mexican territory. From there, Frémont pushed through the rough country down to southern Cali-

**BELOW:** Kit Carson’s presidential commission as a second lieutenant, signed by President James K. Polk, June 9, 1847, which was blocked by the U. S. Senate. Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA) Neg. No. 156300.



fornia, where in his journal entry for April 18, 1844, he announced, and later wrote in *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains*, “We struck the great object of our search—The Spanish Trail—which here was running directly north.” He had reached the Old Spanish Trail above Cajon Pass just before the trail began its bend to the east, descending the Mojave River Valley.

Since Frémont had not been in California before and he was searching for this route, it is clear his guides must have told him about it. Did they also identify it as the Spanish Trail, or did they possibly use some other designation and merely mention that they’d heard Spaniards long ago had traveled it? If the latter was the case, Frémont may have been prompt-

to read reliable information on the Far West, while emigrants preparing to embark upon the Oregon Trail snapped up the book and carried it along as a guide. In turning to Frémont’s stirring pages, readers first saw the name Spanish Trail in print. The tacking on, a few years later, of the adjective “Old” gave it a bit more romantic luster.

Frémont had in mind to follow several hundred miles of the Old Spanish Trail, as far as central Utah, before breaking off and taking another route back to his starting point in Missouri. As the party worked its way across the Mojave Desert, it encountered two New Mexican refugees—a middle-aged man, Andrés Fuentes, and a boy, Pablo Hernández—who were the only survivors of a small party from Santa Fe that had

**PRAISE OF CARSON CAUGHT THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION, AND WITHIN A SHORT TIME HE WAS RECOGNIZED AS A CELEBRITY.**



**OLD SPANISH TRAIL**, America's 15th National Historic Trail. Produced by the Mapping Committee of the Old Spanish Trail Association, [www.oldspringtrail.org](http://www.oldspringtrail.org). Map revision of April 2007.

ed then and there to bestow the name Spanish Trail. Even had he first heard the term from Carson or one of his other western veterans, his use was to be definitive, since so far as we know, he first used the name in print, bringing it to the attention of the public.

That occurred in the next year, 1845, with publication of his journal as a U.S. Senate document. At once it was picked up and brought out in a popular edition by trade publishers, quickly reaching ten thousand copies sold. Americans on the East Coast were hungry

been massacred by Indians. These two had been out herding and managed to escape, driving the loose animals. At the oasis of Bitter Spring, they left the horses and continued west until their chance meeting with the Americans.

The expedition reached Bitter Spring, only to discover that the stock had been driven off by the Indians. Carson and Godey promptly volunteered to go in pursuit and attempt a recovery. Upon their return a day and a half later, Frémont wrote dramatically in his journal, “This expedition of Carson and Godey may be considered among the boldest...in the annals of western adventure. Two men, in a savage desert, pursue day and night an unknown body of Indians...attack them on sight—defeat them in an instant—and for what? To punish the robbers of the desert and to avenge the wrongs of Mexicans whom they did not know. I repeat: it was Carson and Godey who did this.”

The recital of this thrilling episode on the Old Spanish Trail was probably the very one, when published the next year, that launched Carson’s national reputation as a romantic and mythic fron-

tiersman in the nature of James Fenimore Cooper's fictional heroes. Frémont's extravagant praise of Carson caught the public imagination, and within a short time he was recognized as a celebrity.

Two years later Carson was back in California participating in the Bear Flag Revolt, which led to United States annexation of the territory at the end of the Mexican War. In 1847 he was sent on a transcontinental courier mission to Washington, D.C., carrying military dispatches for the president and the War Department. On the trip east, he took the Gila Trail across southern Arizona to New Mexico and then picked up the Santa Fe Trail, going horseback as far as Fort Leavenworth, where he boarded a steamboat.

In Washington, Carson delivered the mail, and a grateful President James K. Polk granted him a lieutenant's commission in the army. Polk also asked him to turn around and go back to the West Coast to deliver new dispatches to the U.S. military governor of California. Carson retraced the Santa Fe Trail on this journey, but once in New Mexico's capital, he turned north to visit his home and wife in Taos.

After a ten-day rest there (well earned), he and a sixteen-man protective escort rode out of Taos on the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. As far as we know this was the first time that Carson covered the entire length of the Old Spanish Trail. Of that 1,100-mile trip, from Taos to Los Angeles, he mentions in his memoirs only one small incident, described in a few lines. On the Muddy River in Nevada, the party was surrounded and threatened by 300 hostile Indians. They may have been Southern Paiutes, or possibly Utes on their way to coastal California to rustle livestock. Through sheer bravado, Carson dispersed the Indians when they refused his order to withdraw.

There must have been other startling adventures on this long courier mission, and we sorely wish that



some chronicler had been along to record them. After Carson arrived in Los Angeles and delivered his mail, he reported for military duty, since he was now a lieutenant. The governor assigned him to spend the winter in command of a detachment guarding Cajon Pass on the Old Spanish Trail. His instructions were to intercept thieves, Indians, or others who might be fleeing eastward with stolen animals. As it happened, winter was the off-season for rustling, so Carson had very little to do. Still, here is another episode in his career that is linked to the Old Spanish Trail.

The year 1848 brings us to Kit Carson's grandest adventure of all on the Old Spanish Trail—another courier mission cross-country to Washington, D.C. On this occasion, the twenty-seven-man escort included Lt. George Douglas Brewerton, a young man in his early twenties, a keen observer, and a budding writer and artist. And bless him! He left us one of the most detailed accounts of any traveler on the Old Spanish Trail. It is filled with descriptions of marvelous experiences, and through his narrative the old trail lives again in the reader's mind.

Brewerton's story was first published serially in

Kit Carson, seated and in the center of a Masonic group comprising Col. D. H. Rucker (to Carson's left), Brig. Gen. James H. Carleton (to Carson's right), and standing from left: Col. E. H. Bergmann, delegate Charles P. Clever, Col. Nelson H. Davis, Col. Herbert M. Enos, surgeon Basil K. Norris, and Col. J. C. McFerran. Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA) Neg. No. 9826.

*Harper's New Monthly Magazine* between 1853 and 1862, and within a few years was forgotten. Not until 1930 were the chapters pulled from *Harper's* back files and published as a book under the new title *Overland with Kit Carson*. That volume soon went out of print and remained so until 1993, when the University of Nebraska Press released a handsome paperback edition. We can be ever so grateful that young Lieutenant Brewerton survived his trip over the Old Spanish Trail, because his book made a fine contribution to its history.

Incidentally, Carson's version of that 1848 courier mission with Brewerton runs to all of three measly

So far as we know, after 1848 Carson never again traveled the Old Spanish Trail all the way between California and New Mexico. Later, however, he did use sections of both the North Branch and the South Branch from New Mexico into Colorado, and possibly even into Utah. That was during the 1850s and early 1860s, when he served as Indian agent for the Utes, with the agency headquarters at his home in Taos. When the tribe was at peace, he would visit their camps, and when they were hostile, he would accompany military expeditions that operated on parts of the Old Spanish Trail.

After service in the Civil War and the Indian Wars in New Mexico, Kit Carson died May 23, 1868, at Fort Lyon, Colorado, on the mountain route of the Santa Fe Trail.



**IT IS SOMETIMES SAID THAT KIT CARSON HAS BEEN** greatly overrated because there were other mountain men who had amazing careers but never received proper recognition. The difference with Carson is that his main achievements came in the second half of his life, after his trapping period. He also had a good publicist in John C. Frémont, who admired him and gave him large credit in his books. Another part of Carson's luck was that, being often in the right place at the right time, he took part in many major events in the history of the Far West. That circumstance kept him in the public eye.

But specifically, just why Carson emerged as a stellar player in western history can be attributed, I believe, to three of his personal qualities. They are his courage, his competence, and his character. The first two really define the third. To conclude, I wish to relate briefly a couple of incidents that happened to Carson when he was out on trails, because they illustrate his possession of these virtues.

The first occurred in the spring of 1843, shortly after Carson had married Josefa Jaramillo and established their home in Taos. He was asked at that time to carry important letters to the fur trading post of Bent's Fort in southeastern Colorado. Mounted on a well-bred horse, Carson set out on that dangerous ride with a single companion, a native Taoseño, whom he fails to name in his memoirs. The pair crossed the mountains



**CARSON KNEW "BOLDNESS ALONE  
COULD SAVE US."**

**— LT. GEORGE DOUGLAS BREWERTON**

**ABOVE:** Kit Carson house, Taos, New Mexico. Photograph by T. Harmon Parkhurst. Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA) Neg. No. 007133.

paragraphs in his memoirs. Upon arriving in Missouri, eastbound, he gave an interview to a reporter for the *St. Louis Republican*. In its issue of August 4, 1848, the newspaper said this: "Mr. Kit Carson bearer of dispatches from California arrived in the city this morning. He met with no adventure of any interest as far as Santa Fe!" We can be sure that is what Carson told the reporter in his usual modest way—that nothing worthy of note had occurred during his crossing of the Old Spanish Trail. Incredible! From the same experience, Brewerton had seen enough of interest to produce an entire book.

east of Taos, dropped onto an open plain, and headed for the mouth of Raton Pass on the Santa Fe Trail. At one point they stopped to rest their horses. Suddenly the men caught sight of a Ute war party racing toward them. The Taoseño urged Carson to leave him and escape on his fast horse.

In his memoirs, Carson said, “I considered the advice very good and was about to mount my horse I [sic] when I thought how cowardly it would be for me to desert this man who had so willingly offered to sacrifice his life to save mine. Upon this I changed my mind and told him that I would [stay and] die with him.”

What loyalty, on the part of both men! As the warriors rode up and surrounded them, they stood back-to-back with their single-shot muzzleloaders, each leveled at one of the leaders. Reported Carson: “They remained around us for about half an hour; then, seeing but little hope of being able to kill us without losing two of themselves, they left.” Strong character, buttressed by courage and competence, had saved the twosome.

The second incident I want to mention happened toward the end of Carson’s 1848 courier mission eastward over the Old Spanish Trail with Lieutenant Brewerton. In the San Luis Valley, descending the North Branch above Taos, the exhausted mail party was pursued by 150 hostile Indians. Carson guided his companions into a copse of stunted trees, where they tied their mules, then he arranged them in a skirmishers’ line. He next stepped forward, fully exposed, and began to harangue the enemy in their own language. Brewerton wrote, “Carson’s whole demeanor was now so entirely changed that he looked like a different man. His eyes fairly flashed, and his rifle was grasped with all the energy of an iron will.” And the lieutenant added that Carson knew “boldness alone could save us.”

Just when it appeared that the Indians were making ready to ride the whitemen [sic] down, one of their scouts dashed up from the south on a lathered horse and imparted some important news. The warriors began to fall back and retreat, so Carson ordered his men to mount and ride as fast as possible down the trail toward Taos. At the first small settlement encoun-



tered, they learned that a large body of volunteers had taken the field against this very band of Indians and it was word of its approach that had been brought by the scout.

“In that lay the secret of our almost miraculous escape,” Brewerton continued.

An added factor, of course, was Carson’s courage and boldness, as evidenced by his brazen haranguing of the Indians. Maj. Edward Wynkoop, who served with Carson in the Civil War, stated in an article in the February 24, 1886, edition of the *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, “Kit Carson knew how to lead men into battle and to keep them there.” It is plain that courage, competence, and character shaped the configuration of his life.

Psychologist Carl Jung once said, “Ultimately everything depends on the quality of the individual.” If that statement is true, as I believe it is, then Carson should be recognized as a man of quality. Those of us attending this conference ought to be glad that the career of this romantic nineteenth-century figure, Christopher Carson, intersected at various points with the romance of the Old Spanish Trail. ■

Noted author and historian Marc Simmons, Ph.D., is a past president of the Santa Fe Trail Association. This article is based on his lecture “Kit Carson and the Romance of the Old Spanish Trail,” presented at the seventh annual conference of the Old Spanish Trail Association, held in Taos, New Mexico, in June 2000 and printed in *Spanish Traces* 6, No. 3 (fall 2000): 10–14

“Copy from original photograph of Kit Carson, taken in December, 1864, St. Louis, Missouri. Only one he would sit for up to that date. Only one that he certainly consciously posed for. Like the Indians of his era, he disliked and avoided having his picture taken, until at the persuasion of his friend, Col. E. W. Wynkoop, he agreed to have the original of this copy made, with the proviso that there be only two—one for himself and one for Mr. and Mrs. Wynkoop, and the negative be destroyed.” This information is from the handwritten explanation on file with this photograph of the locket. The photograph is in the Wynkoop Collection, Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA) Neg. No. 58388.