

# Kit Carson left legacy throughout Nevada

By AP

CARSON CITY – When you live in or near the state’s capital city, it’s hard to miss Kit Carson’s influence.

There’s Carson City, the Carson Valley, the Carson Pass and the Carson River. He also merits not just a mountain but the entire Carson Range, west of Reno and Carson City.

A life-size bronze statue of the pathfinder atop his horse stands in the mall between the Legislative Building and the Capitol, and the local library is full of juvenile books about the man who guided John C. Fremont’s expedition when it passed through the largely unknown Great Basin from 1843 to 1844. Kit Carson is our hero.



A life-size bronze statue of Kit Carson atop his horse stands in the mall between the Legislative Building and the Capitol in Carson City. Photo/Cathleen Allison/AP

Dime novels romanticizing Carson appeared as early as 1849. Author Herman Melville even mentioned him in his classic “Moby

Dick.”

It is said that star-struck tourists would visit Carson at his home in Taos, N.M., before his death. Some would walk away disappointed because the 5-foot-5-inch Carson was not the giant they imagined after reading of his exploits.

State archivist Jeff Kintop acknowledged the pride he felt when he first got a job in Carson City.

“There was something cool about being in Carson City,” he told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. “We were brought up on Kit Carson and Davy Crockett. They were the heroes of the West.”

### **Opening the West**

Born in Kentucky in 1809 and raised on the Missouri frontier, Christopher Houston “Kit” Carson gave up any thought of an education at age 9 when his father died. He was forced to help his mother, who had 10 children. He would hide his inability to read throughout adulthood, but he did learn to write his name and speak five Indian languages. Signatures of Carson sell today for \$14,700.

At 14, Carson became an apprentice to a saddle maker. He hated the work and fled at 16 with merchants heading down the Santa Fe Trail. He became a trapper and a mountain man with Jim Bridger and over the years became as acquainted as anyone with lands in the unknown West.

In 1842, he met Lt. John C. Fremont by chance when the two were on a steamboat going down the Missouri River. They became lifelong friends after Fremont hired him to be his scout for expeditions into the Mexican-owned West.

Besides Nevada, those expeditions included battles in 1846 in which Fremont took Los Angeles from the Mexicans. Carson also brought 200 fresh personnel through Mexican lines to rescue Gen. Stephen Kearny and his troops in San Diego. That act

helped the Americans complete their conquest and contributed to Carson's legend.

When the United States subdued the "Californios" in the Bear Flag rebellion, Carson rode east to Washington, D.C., to inform President James Polk that the nation stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

After his expeditions with Fremont, Carson decided to settle down as a rancher with wife, Josefa, in Taos.

Around this time, he came across a burned camp where Apache had killed settlers. There he saw for the first time a book on the life of Kit Carson. "Burn the ... thing," was his response.

In 1853, he and a partner herded thousands of sheep through Nevada and across the Sierra Nevada to Sacramento, Calif. He would never see "Carson City," which received its name five years later. The sale of the sheep in gold rush California made him rich.

Carson became the Indian agent in northern New Mexico and held that job until the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. He led the advance at Valverde, near present day Socorro, N.M., with a group of New Mexican volunteers who subdued the Confederates. But then the Army chose Carson to lead the battle against a new foe: the Navajo.

### **The Long Walk**

This year not only marks Nevada's 150th anniversary but the 150th anniversary of "The Long Walk of 1864," when Civil War brevet Gen. Kit Carson on government orders conducted a scorched earth policy of burning cornfields, killing sheep and taking over water holes to force the Navajo to surrender to Army control.

The Army then forced 8,000 American Indians to walk more than 300 miles from northeastern Arizona to Fort Sumner, N.M., or

the Bosque Redondo. Three hundred died along the way.

The Navajo today contend that the United States wanted them out of northeastern Arizona to open the area to mining. They also say that Carson paid Ute and other American Indians who were their traditional enemies to burn their hogans, steal their livestock and capture them for slavery.

Starving and without water, the Navajo surrendered to Carson and his troops at Canyon de Chelly in January 1864.

After the Civil War, Carson returned to Taos and tried to expand his ranch into Colorado. When he died in 1868, legend has it, his last words were "Wish I had time for one more bowl of chili."

### **Myth of the West**

Some historians see Carson as an American Indian killer, a victim of American expansionism and a racist. He may have been all of those things, but he also was a man who shared the views of most white people of his time.

He remains a villain to the Navajo Nation.

"We hold him responsible for the suffering the Navajo people experienced," said Clarendia Begay, curator at the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Ariz.

"A lot of people don't know about the Long Walk. We haven't changed in our views of him."

In published works, Carson contended he only killed bad tribesmen, never "a squaw or a papoose," and despised those who did.

His apologists blame his commanding officer, Gen. James Carleton, for orders to kill all who would not surrender and yield to reservation life.

But as early as 1857, Carson had adopted Carleton's philosophy that the only way to tame the Navajo was by confining them to a reservation, teaching them agricultural skills and stationing troops nearby to prevent them from leaving.

"As long as these mountain Indians are permitted to run at large, this country will always remain in its impoverished state, and the only remedy is to compel them to live in settlements, cultivate the soil and learn to gain their maintenance independent of the general government," Carson said.

Sheryl N. Hayes-Zorn, acting director of the Nevada Historical Society in Reno, says Carson remains in the national consciousness largely because of the 19th century dime novel and the television shows and movies that romanticized him.

Without much accuracy, they created a hero for generations of children who grew up playing cowboys and Indians.

"I think that kept his legend going," she said.

During a recent public television documentary on Carson, author Dayton Duncan called him the "greatest living symbol of the desire Americans had to mythologize the West and take real things and turn them into something else. He just was who he was and other people projected onto him their own beliefs, their own myths."