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Robert G. Athearn

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## THE EDUCATION OF KIT CARSON'S SON

*By* ROBERT G. ATHEARN \*

ONE day in the spring of 1848, a young first lieutenant stationed at Monterey, California, learned that the far-famed Kit Carson, trapper and scout, had arrived from Taos with mail and dispatches. Having seen Fremont's recent writings, the officer was anxious to look upon this man who had come to international notice through his feats of daring in the western wilderness. Making his way to the tavern he found a small, round-shouldered individual with hair that was not quite as red as his own and whose appearance was somewhat less spectacular than he had imagined. Carson proved to be a further disappointment in that his speech was monosyllabic and he displayed little tendency to talk about the exploits that were claimed for him. Yet, in their modesty, the two men were much alike and shortly a warm friendship developed. The officer, William Tecumseh Sherman, treasured it the rest of his life.

Nearly twenty years later, when Sherman had risen to the rank of lieutenant general and was in command of the vast Military Division of the Missouri that stretched out across the high plains to the Rockies, the two met again. In the fall of 1866, the General made a trip westward along the Platte River and then swung southward to Denver and on to Fort Garland where he sought a conference with the Ute Indians. He found the fort commanded by his old friend Carson, now a brevet brigadier general of volunteers. As Sherman and Governor Alexander Cummings, of Colorado, put their questions to the Indians, Kit Carson acted as interpreter. The talks went on for several days.

Such negotiations were always long and tiresome. The Indians were given to vexatious periods of silent contemplation between questions and as the time dragged on Sherman had an opportunity to acquaint himself with Carson the family man. The General was quite fond of children and as youngsters of all hues played around the fort he watched them with interest and amusement. General James F. Rusling, who was

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\* Professor of History, University of Colorado.

present, later wrote that during one of the talks Sherman noticed a small brown child wandering inquisitively around the room. Taking the startled boy in his arms, he sat holding him until the anxious Indian mother discovered her offspring in the council room, his head nestled comfortably against the gold-starred shoulder straps.

Between sessions Sherman visited with Carson and his family. The children, a half dozen of them who Sherman described as "wild and untrained as a band of Mexican mustangs," aroused his curiosity. One day as the young ones streamed through the room in which the men were seated, scantily clad and noisy, the visiting general turned to his host and said, "Kit, what are you doing about your children?"

"That is a source of great anxiety," the aging westerner confessed. "I myself had no education. I value education as much as any man, but I have never had the advantage of schools, and now that I am getting old and infirm, I fear I have not done right by my children." Sherman could appreciate such feelings. He later wrote that Carson could not even write his own name and that his official reports were signed by his wife.

Anxious to be of assistance, Sherman explained that the Catholic College at South Bend, Indiana (now Notre Dame University), had given him a scholarship good for twenty years. He offered to divide it, giving half to Kit, so that two of the Carson boys could each have five years at the school. Kit expressed his appreciation for the offer and said that he would keep it in mind.

In less than two years the elder Carson was dead. He passed away at Fort Lyon, Colorado, in May, 1868, and was buried at Taos, New Mexico. Before the end came, he asked his relatives to send his eldest son on to General Sherman who, he said, had promised to educate him. Before long there appeared before the Sherman home in St. Louis a husky looking young man who identified himself as William Carson and said he had come to fulfill his father's request that he go to school. His sole possessions consisted of a revolver, a copy of *Dr. Peters' Life of Kit Carson*\* and about forty dollars in cash.

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\* DeWitt Clinton Peters, *Pioneer Life and Frontier Adventures. An Authentic Rec-*

Sherman was probably somewhat surprised by William's arrival at his doorstep. While he had offered the use of the scholarship to Carson's sons, he had not expected to assume the complete responsibility of educating one of them. As he later admitted, "I found that 'Scholarship' amounted to what is known as 'tuition,' but for three years I paid all his expenses of board, clothing, books, &c., amounting to about \$300 a year." Nevertheless, William was welcomed into the family and after staying on for a while with the Sherman children, he was sent on to South Bend to commence his studies.

The time-honored lament of college professors that their students come to them unprepared for higher education certainly applied to William Carson. Although he had commenced his studies at the Lux Academy in Taos, New Mexico, at the age of four, he appears to have gained little recognition from school authorities for anything except good conduct.\* From time to time, Kit had urged upon his wife the necessity of the boy's education and when the youngster was nine he asked her to "tell him for me to apply himself as much as possible so that he may learn for if he applies himself I shall have the greatest pleasure in doing for him." How successfully William wrestled with his academic problems cannot be determined, but his years at the Catholic College indicated clearly that his earlier schooling was insufficient for the hurdles of higher education. Of course, to subject a fifteen year old boy, fresh from the relatively unsettled regions of the Rockies, to the kind of competition he now faced was perhaps asking a great deal, even as a death-bed request.

Records at the University of Notre Dame show that William paid the required five dollar entrance fee at that institution on September 9, 1868.\* On that day also he paid \$150

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*ord of the Romantic Life and Daring Exploits of Kit Carson and His Companions.* Peters was a surgeon in the U. S. army who had copied down Carson's life from dictation. The work was published in 1856 or 1857.

\* John T. Lux, principal of the Lux Academy at Taos, certified on February 25, 1858, that "William Carson merits the approbation of his instructor for good conduct the past three months."

\* No transcript of William's grade is available. The academic records for that period were lost in a fire, but an old ledger from the Office of Student Accounts was saved and on page 576 appears the account of "Wm. Carson, New Mexico." (Letter from Rev. Robert J. Lochner, C.S.C., Assistant to the Vice President to R. G. Athearn, February 18, 1955.)

for a year's board and room. Among his supplies were a Reader, \$.75, an Arithmetic, \$1.00 and a slate, \$.25. Within a few days after he was settled, he wrote a letter to his sponsor. When Sherman read the words that had been painfully etched upon a narrow, lined sheet of stationery, he knew he had a boy in college, for it contained a request as old as education itself. William needed money. "I was very glad yesterday when I reseave your leater," the writer opened his communication pleasantly. "I dont have write you because I was wating a leatter from you every day And please tell me when you write me when you are coming to veaseat us." Then he got down to business. "And please tell me where shal I gate some money. I dont recolect where dead you tell me to geat some." The essentials dispensed with, William closed his letter with "best regards [to] you and Misess Sherman and all the famlay."

During the remainder of the academic year the account shows that William bought the usual things a college boy of that day needed. In December he was charged for a new slate (\$.25), stationery (\$.18) and some collars (\$.25). In February he required "Pants Rep., \$.30," and "Boots Rep., \$1.35." In March he received another reader (\$1.75), thirty-two socks (\$1.50) and some collars (\$.25). In May he was credited with \$.40 for the reader he returned.

In the fall of 1869, now in his second year, William reported to his sponsor that he was getting on quite well. At the General's request he had gone to see one of Sherman's friends who supplied him with some new clothing. "I got from him a pare of pants and a coat and a hat all amounted to twenty one dollars." This was in addition to a "whole soot of clothes" and "two moar shurts" received on an earlier occasion. His ledger sheet indicates that he also purchased the usual handkerchiefs, collars, stationery, and stamps as well as a periodic "H. cut." The latter item cost \$.20. At the opening of his second year he required a Geography (\$1.20), a History (\$1.70) and a linen coat (\$2.00). That term he got to November before the bookkeeper noted "Pants rep. \$.35." He must have paid an unusual amount of attention to his books that fall, for in December the item "Pants rep." again appeared against his account. This time the damage was more serious and cost

ninety cents to repair. By March (1870) he needed boots (\$7.50) and more shirts (\$8.00). During that month he wrote to his benefactor that while he was progressing with his studies, "I am in the same classes I ware last session." Sickness had pulled him down, but, he insisted, "I am tring to do my best. . . ."

His best was not enough. At the end of three years Sherman learned from the authorities at the College that while William was a good natured boy, perfectly willing to try, he had, as Sherman admitted, "no appetite for learning." The General accepted the decision and acknowledged that "His letters to me confirmed this conclusion, as he could not possibly spell." The problem now became one of what to do with William. After giving the matter some careful thought, Sherman decided to send the boy to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. General Langdon Easton of the Quartermaster Corps could find enough for him to do to earn his board and room while he studied for a commission in the army.

Accordingly, William went to Leavenworth where he was employed as a messenger. In his off-duty hours he reported to Lieutenant George W. Baird, Fifty Infantry adjutant, for instruction. In October of 1872, William reported his progress to Sherman, saying he was under Baird's tutelage and hoped to pass the coming examination "for to go in the Army." He mentioned that on September 1 he had become twenty years old. William's newest instructor was very little more optimistic about his academic future than the fathers at the Catholic College had been. In August, 1873, Baird wrote directly to Sherman, describing the scholastic campaign and admitting defeat. "While Mr. Carson's studies were much interrupted, by sickness, he informed me, and from other causes from what I saw of him I infer that he is naturally very dull in all matters relating to books and that he suffers from the effect of having received little, if any, systematic instruction in his earlier boyhood," the Lieutenant explained to his superior. He stated flatly that William could never pass the examination prescribed by Army Headquarters and the only possible solution was to place him under a "conscientious and patient company commander to learn the trade that way."

The future of General Sherman's protege now became an

army problem. Colonel Edward Hatch, stationed at Ringgold Barracks, Texas, volunteered to take him on. Young Carson, he said, would be quite useful on the Texas frontier. He knew the Mexicans well. In fact, "he would make a valuable officer for all scouting purposes." General Stewart Van Vliet, a West Point classmate of Sherman's and a long-time friend, wrote from Fort Leavenworth that unless William were "examined *judiciously*" he would be in deep trouble trying to pass an examination. "He will make a good cavalry officer if he gets in," Van Vliet admitted, "but he is not much on 'larnin.'" As the time for an academic showdown drew near, William joined in the general concern. In August of 1873 he wrote to Sherman, expressing anxiety about the hurdle he must clear. In what subjects would he be examined, he asked? Would he really have to take the examination? He knew that enlisted men who were appointed lieutenant were examined under regulation G. O. 93-1867, but since he was a "sevelian," would this rule apply?

Sherman had done all he could in the matter. He had gone to Grant, in person, asking that William be appointed a second lieutenant in the Ninth (Colored) U. S. Cavalry. Grant promptly ordered the appointment, subject to the examination required by law. Reluctantly William went before a board of officers at Fort Leavenworth and listened to the dreaded questions. "After careful examination," Sherman revealed, "the board found him *deficient*, in reading, writing and arithmetic. Of course he could not be commissioned."

And so William dispiritedly made his way back home. He was no more discouraged than Sherman who wrote, "I had given him four years of my guardianship, about \$1,000 of my own money, and the benefit of my influence, all in vain. By nature, he was not adapted to 'modern uses.'" There was no further course to pursue now. With reluctance he wrote to William, advising him to return to Colorado to live with Thomas Boggs, a long-time intimate of Kit Carson's, and a relative by marriage. In the ensuing years Sherman heard little from his young friend. Once William wrote, asking Sherman to procure the Ute Agency for him and dutifully the General tried, only to learn that someone else had been promised the post.

Back in Colorado, William settled down to raise livestock. He married a daughter of Thomas Tobin, one of Kit's old friends, and lived a quiet rancher's life. In January, 1889, while he was unharnessing a team of horses, his own revolver was accidentally discharged and its bullet passed through his knee joint, lodging in the bones below the knee where it would be difficult to remove. A Denver paper reported that "owing to the bad condition of Carson's system the Doctor expressed doubts as to his recovery," but nevertheless the surgeon planned to amputate the limb if the patient indicated that he could survive the operation. Before he had a chance to operate, the patient suddenly died.

While William Carson showed that he could become a successful rancher, the educational experiment in which he had participated proved to be a signal failure. The unlettered Kit Carson did not live to share his son's disappointment and his old friend Sherman, who would soon express his unhappiness over his own boy's decision not to go to law school, wrote off the effort as one of those losses sustained in any speculative venture. He had done his part in trying to fulfill Kit's wishes. Kit, who Sherman said could not even write, had become a volunteer brigadier general. But that day was gone, and by the 1870's the army, steadily shrinking in size, was obliged to tighten considerably the conditions under which it would give a commission. William, who was "not much on 'larnin,'" was simply the victim of rising army educational requirements.

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Note: Information concerning the efforts of Kit Carson and General W. T. Sherman to educate William are found in the following locations: The letters of William to General Sherman while the young man was at Notre Dame are in the William T. Sherman Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress, Volumes 24 and 27. The letters from Carson, Baird, Hatch and Van Vliet, written while William was at Fort Leavenworth, are in Volumes 33, 35 and 36 of the Sherman letters, Library of Congress. William Carson's expense ledger, while at school in Indiana, is at Notre Dame University, in the Office of Students' Accounts. Other material can be found in Edwin L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days, 1809-1868* (Chicago, 1914 and the revised, two volume edition, New York, 1935); Edward S. Ellis, *The Life of Kit Carson* (Chicago, 1899); and William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman* (2 volumes, Fourth Ed., N. Y. 1891). Very little information concerning William's later life is available. Ellen F. Walrath, a pioneer woman, wrote a small piece entitled "Kit Carson's Son, Billie" for the *Alamosa Courier* in June, 1937. Major John H. Nankivell mentioned that he ran a general store in an article about Fort Garland, Colorado, in *The Colorado Magazine*, Volume XVI, No. 1 (January 1939), 27. Sherman's interest in William appears in Albert W. Thompson, "The Death and Last Will of Kit Carson," *The Colorado Magazine*, Volume V (October, 1928). Details of his death can be found in the *Denver Republican*, January 20, 1889.