



Episode 8, 2012: Carson Family Secrets

Charles: My name is Charles Burns. About six years ago, I went to the estate sale of an in-law. I was scanning through her bookshelf that she had there. And I ran across this publication. It's the Life and Adventures of Kit Carson. I bought it for about ten bucks.

When I was growing up in the 50s, all the kids dressed up with the cowboy outfits and cap guns. Kit Carson to me was a national hero. He was a frontiersman, an adventurer, a man who really was an icon for his day. When I first got the book, I started flipping through it. One of the pages was written in quill pen with a bunch of names on it with old dates.

It stopped me dead in my tracks. It was the lineage of the Carson family. So I want to know if this is Kit Carson's family heirloom.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I don't know much about Kit Carson.

But I'm in the right place to find out. Charles asked to meet at Carson's grave in Taos, New Mexico.

Charles: It's about his life and his adventures.

Tukufu: I see. Now what do you know about Kit Carson?

Charles: I know he was an American icon. A frontiersman.

Tufuku: He was a trapper, scout and Indian fighter. Reports of his exploits made him one of the first western heroes.

Charles: I grew up in a Western era. And everything seemed to revolve around some of those legends.

Tukufu: Okay. Did you read it?

Charles: No, I started to, and I thought I didn't want to break the binding down anymore.

Tukufu: Yeah. Yeah.

The book's seen better days. The front pages are missing, so I can't see how old it is—other pages are scribbled on. Newspaper clippings are tucked throughout.

Charles: Well when I got to the middle of the book, what I found were some blank pages with the Carson family lineage written in 'em. But I don't know who wrote it.

Tukufu: Why do you think someone would write this in the book?

Charles: I think it was important for people back then to keep track of their lineage. Like... like a Bible.

Tufuku: The genealogy page begins with the marriage of Carson to Josefa Jamarillo on February 2nd, 1843. Eight Carson children are listed, along with their birthdates. The last entry reads “girl, born April 13th, 1868.” That’s just ten days before Josefa died.

And he dies May 23, 1968. Just one month later.

Did Kit or Josefa write this? The fact the writing stops right before both of their deaths is compelling.

Charles: That’s the way I saw it.

Tukufu: Do you know if the information here is correct?

Charles: I don’t.

Tukufu: Okay. What do you want to know?

Charles: I want to know if this actually belonged to the Carson family. Maybe even Kit Carson himself.

Tukufu: The book looks old. Can’t deny that. But is it in fact old enough to have been owned by Kit Carson?

The book was written by De Witt Peters. It’s oddly silent on Carson’s personal life—there is barely any mention of Josefa—but it’s full of rip roaring frontier action, including a bear attack.

Tufku (reading): “And their monstrous forearms hung with sharp bony claws, ready and anxious to hug his body in a close and most loving embrace.”

My office has verified the names and birthdates of the family members to a point—some sources say he had seven children by Josefa, some say eight. But the office was able to verify the names on the inside cover: Jesse Stockton, judge Isaac Hitt, Saville bookshop, Washington D.C. they may have been previous owners, but none appear to have Carson family connections. One name is partially obscured by a tear in the page.

There’s something like, “Ms. ‘blop blop’ Allen. Raton, New Mexico.” This book could have been owned by someone who was fascinated with Kit Carson and wanted to collect in one place all of the information they could about this man’s life.

But there’s also a tantalizing note next to a newspaper clipping about Carson. It says simply, “my father.” Did one of Carson’s children write that?

I mean, I don’t really have any clear indication that this was ever in the possession of a member of the Carson Family.

I put a call into my colleague Wes Cowan to see if he could recommend a book dealer, and he did me one better...he’s in new Mexico for a stopover.

Wes: Wow, how are you?

Tukufu: Thanks man. I’m well, I’m well.

Wes: Oh, wow. That is fabulous. Fabulous!

Tufuku: As an auctioneer, Wes has sold the gamut of old west Americana. Carson artifacts are especially coveted. Wes says the life and adventures of Kit Carson was first published in 1858.

Wes: I can tell you, just by looking at the way that the book is decorated and bound, and the little decorative touches here, and the raised borders on the spine. You know, this looks to me like a book that was published in the Nineteenth Century. And I would guess...you know, 1850s, 1860s.

Tufuku: Wes suspects we may have a first edition.

Wes: It should have 534 pages.

Tufuku: Five hundred and thirty-four pages.

Wes: Okay.

Tufuku: The plates, or illustrations, also match up.

Wes: This is a first edition.

Tufuku: We got a first edition.

Wes: Yeah.

Tufuku: He explains how Carson gained fame in the 1840s, when he was hired by John Fremont to guide his expedition into California and Oregon. Eventually, he worked as a scout during the Indian wars. Although our account of his exploits was based on his dictation to a secretary, Wes says that doesn't mean every story is entirely as it happened.

Wes: I'll guarantee you that some of those stories are embellished by Carson himself.

Tufuku: Yes. Yes, yes yes.

What the book doesn't include, Wes tells me, are the details of his "scorched earth" policy of removing the Navajo from their land in 1863, or their later forced "long walk" to their new reservation that killed hundreds.

Wes: Their removal from their traditional homeland is one of the dark pictures...of the history of the Southwest. We can condemn what Carson did with the Navajo, but he was a man of his times

Tufuku: I show Wes the writing.

Wes: Let's see how much it's bleeding through the back of the page here. Yeah, see it's actually eating into the paper.

Tufuku: The deep staining is a hallmark of the acids found in iron gall ink used during the 1800s.

Alright, but we could have here is Kit Carson writing the genealogy of his children. Bam.

Not exactly, Wes explains. Carson never learned to read or write. He couldn't have written the genealogy. But it is possible Carson or a family member owned it.

Tukufu: If this is the book that sat on Kit Carson's bookshelf, how much is this book worth?

Wes: Well, the first thing I'd do is I'd take it away from you, and I'd run out the door with it.

Wes: But seriously, thousands.

Wes: I'm kind of jealous that you got the lead on this, man.

Tukufu: Yeah, that's the way it happens sometimes, Wes.

Tufuku: If Kit Carson didn't record the genealogy. Who did?
Author David Remley spent seven years researching the Carson family for his book. David says that while Carson was sold to the public in dime store novels as an heroic Indian-fighter, he was famously private about his personal life.

David: And that in itself makes it difficult to write a biography of him. Because most of what is known comes from what other people said about him. And he hated it. He was very unhappy about it.

Tukufu: Why?

David: Because that wasn't the real Kit Carson.

Tukufu: Okay. If he was so private, why did he dictate his biography?

David: Well, my guess is that he'd been reading these fictions, these dime novel fictions... He wanted to clear the record.

Tufuku: But David says even with Carson's input, *the life and adventures of Kit Carson* is still a partial account, especially of his personal life. His two earlier marriages are mentioned only in passing, and the book is silent on the tragic death of a young daughter.

David: The only Christian marriage he had was in the church, with Josefa.

Tufuku: By the most accounts, his final marriage to a teenaged Josefa, when he was 33, was happy.

David: The things that happened during his life, he considered personal. Things never to be talked about to anyone.

Tufku: Simple things like how many children he had are hard to verify. David says that's what makes our book, if it's truly from a Carson family member, a unique window to his personal life. David's not sure who wrote this, but he knows someone who might be able to help.

David: I think John Carson is the most likely candidate for that because he has spent his life studying his great grandfather.

Tufuku: John Carson is the family historian.

John: If this came through the family, this would be one of the very few things that come through the family.

Tufuku: John says after Kit and Josefa died, the family's possessions were sold to support their children. I ask if the genealogy is accurate.

John: That's...Kit and Josefa's kids.

Tufuku: He recognizes one name.

John: Charles.

Tufuku: Oh, that's your grandfather?

John: That's Grandpa.

Tufuku: But John is more excited to see another entry.

John: Hmm. Now, the...first Charles...he died in infancy. And there's always been a...question about how long he lived. He was born in '50, May. We know that. Uh...now this one has him... passing away April 30th of...'52? Most of the things that I've found is that he was about a year old. With this information, maybe he was two years old.

Tufuku: So was this new information written by a someone who knew the truth?

Tufuku: Now I know Kit Carson didn't write this.

John: No.

Tufuku: Was it Kit Carson's wife?

John: Josepha—as far as I know she could write in Spanish but not in, not very much in English.

Tufuku: Alright. Could one of these children have written this genealogy?

John says it's possible—unlike their father, the children all learned to read and write.

Do you have samples of their writing?

John: I've got samples of three.

Tufuku: John knows of only three Carson children whose letters survive: Charles, Kit jr., and Teresina. We'll start with Charles.

If we put those Cs next to each other, those Cs do not match.

John: Do not match.

Tufuku: Alright, let's try the next one.

Tufuku: Kit Carson jr. Is even less of a match. Last up is Teresina. So, we have a C here and a C here. Teresina is the closest match of the three. What was her story?

John: Teresina came back to Boggsville, up in Colorado, and married a gentleman by the name of Dewitt Fulton Allen.

Tukufu: Allen?

John: Allen. And then they...

Tukufu: Wait a minute. His name was Allen?

I ask Charles to meet me at the Carson museum back in Taos.
How does it make you feel to be sitting here in Kit Carson's home?

Charles: It's a thrill.

Tufuku: I tell Charles that his copy of the Carson biography is a first edition.

Charles: So we know it's an old book.

Tufuku: But we couldn't determine whether this was in the Carson household, until we found kit's great-grandson.

We have...Mrs.....and I don't know what's missing, but it does ... end in Allen

John: And Raton, New Mexico. Because that's where they moved to after they were married

John: That's...gotta be from Teresina. I'll be danged. That's great.

Tufuku: While we can't be sure that Teresina wrote the genealogy, John is convinced that this book belonged to her, and possibly to Kit himself.

Charles: That's phenomenal. I could never even hoped for anything like that. To have run across something like this at an estate sale, it's...it's amazing. I've learned a lot about the Carson family. And it's all because of you guys.

Tufuku: After his death, the legend of Kit Carson only grew. The adventures of Kit Carson ran on TV from 1951 to 1955 and multiple Hollywood movies feature his swashbuckling character from the silents up until today.