

## EARLY INDIAN FIGHTING

### THE EXPERIENCE OF DR. HUGH JOHN NEEDHAM, OF NEW ALBANY.

#### Four Years with Col. Kit Carson on the Indian Trail in New Mexico – Perilous Adventures.

It is doubtless well for the peace of the retired Indian fighter that he bears in face and person no characteristic marks of past danger and excitement. Not one human nature student in a million would ever discover in Dr. Hugh John Needham, of New Albany, Ind., a homeopathic physician and man of serene exterior and quiet manner, any indications pointing back to his one-time participation in all the stirring scenes of Indian warfare. For more than thirty-five years Dr. Needham has led an unperturbed existence in this city, but in all that time his recollection of the old adventurous days in New Mexico and Arizona has not lapsed an iota in faithful and vivid interest. Of English parentage and enterprising spirit, this young man, at the beginning of the civil war but nineteen years old, was seeking fortune in the mines of Colorado. The declaration of hostilities between North and South gave a different impetus to the zest for adventure which had led him to the far West, and in 1862, at Parkville, Col., he enlisted under Capt. Charles Deus in Company M, New Mexico Volunteers, commanded by Col. Christopher Carson – none other than the noted "Kit Carson," of frontier prowess and renown. At that time, Dr. Needham relates, the famous Indian fighter and trapper was about fifty-six years old, of short stature, sturdy build and not at all in personal presentment the wild Western ranger depicted by the dime novel romancists (sic). In army garb, his hair worn short in regulation army cut, he bore no sensational insignia of his record as a veteran Indian fighter. He was not in any ordinary sense a remarkable man – not at all a military tactician – and could not maneuver troops, but he was altogether fearless on the Indian trail, and, in the opinion of his regiment, could take fifty men and go through the worst Indian country in the world. By his soldiers he was regarded with devotion; they knew him to be a whole-souled man, always kind and courteous, as well as cautiously considerate of their welfare.

The first rendezvous of Kit Carson's regiment was held at La Castillo, N.M., and it was mustered into service in October, 1862, at Fort Garland, near the old Indian garrison Fort Massachusetts. With the dawning of the civil war the Navajos had taken the warpath, descending in cruel hordes on New Mexican settlements, slaying the settlers, burning their homes and driving off their sheep and goats. Colonel Carson's troops, therefore, were soon ordered to the Navajo country, in the region of the Wasach

mountains, north of Fort Defiance, afterwards Fort Canby, with instructions to subdue the troublesome red warriors.

#### CARSON'S POLICY.

At this time full subjection of the Navajos had never been achieved, although General Sumner and General Canby had made strenuous efforts towards that end. The policy of Col. Kit Carson's campaign was to kill as few Indians as possible, but to scout in details, find their camps, destroy their crops, capture as many as feasible and send them under guard to the regimental headquarters at Fort Defiance. From this point, as they accumulated to the number of 1,000, the Indians were transferred to the government reservation near Fort Sumner, on the Pecos river, in eastern New Mexico.

A campaign against the Navajos was in no sense a "feather-bed war." In addition to the horses and field and staff mules, twenty-four pack mules were allowed to each company, thirty days' rations being carried on scouting expeditions. No tents were allowed, Indian fighters often not seeing a tent for eighteen months at a time. Rations consisted of bacon, dessicated (sic) potatoes, flour, coffee, tea, salt and pepper. When at the forts fish or canned meats could be had, but on the trail this luxury was furnished only by the occasional capture of sheep and goats from the Indians. Hardtack was unknown, the men baking their own simple bread in mess pans covered with hot coals, or in ruder fashion on flat rocks under which a fire was built. No game was found in the Navajo country, as the Navajos were mainly an agricultural tribe, raising corn, wheat and frijoles, or beans. Water was a scarce article in that region, troops having often to ride from twenty-four to thirty-six hours before finding it in sufficient quantity. On finding water Colonel Carson would order a halt, the animals would be watered, supper cooked, canteens filled and then the commander would select with great care a site for the night's encampment, never allowing his men to camp near timber, but moving back near the hills as the safest position against midnight surprise from the Indians. After a day's hard riding pine trees from seventy-five to one hundred feet high would have to be felled before a fire could be made for supper. Sometimes the men would have to melt snow to get a place in which to lie; then, with rifles under them, rolled in army blanket or rubber blanket, with their heads on their saddles, they would sink into slumber, liable in an hour, perhaps, to be aroused to powder and shot realities by the wild yelling of the aggressive Navajo. The Indians were generally encountered in bodies of fifty, and were equipped with bow and arrow and a few stolen squirrel rifles, but they made up in craft and savagery what was lacking in armament. When a Navajo camp was found their fields would be destroyed and fed to the animals in the scouting party, the intention being to force the Navajos to surrender. Squaws and children were taken prisoners and delivered at Fort Defiance. With great

zeal Colonel Carson's men scouted in the Navajo country during the summer and winter of 1863, and the results were that during the fall and winter, having nothing to eat but a few sheep and goats, the Indians abandoned the conquest of the United States and came into Fort Defiance and Fort Wingate, in northwestern New Mexico, in disorganized bodies of all sizes, surrendering to government protection.

#### THE UNATTRACTIVE NAVAJO.

Between the Indian rigged up in beads, buckskin and feathers, for a tribal pow-wow or ceremonious dance, and the Indian of the warpath, as pictured by Dr. Needham, a wide difference exists. War paint and breech cloth constituted the red man's garb for combat with the more heavily accoutred pale faces. The Navajo Indian is of medium size, tall ones being exceptional. As a rule, he is never fleshy, and never still a moment, being excessively restless. He is always dirty; give him a shirt, he dons it at once, and wears it until it drops from his body in black rags. Few Indians wear beards or whiskers; in observation of twenty-eight tribes but two red men with hair on their faces were noted. These were Navajo chiefs; one wore a small goatee and large mustache, the other an imperial and small mustache; and they were known, respectively, in their wigwam social circles as "Whiskers" and "Little Whiskers." Among Indians the strongest tribal badge is the moccasin, each tribe having its own peculiar model for constructing this primitive footwear. These modes are strictly adhered to, and the Indian recognizes his friends and enemies of other tribes by their characteristic foot prints on the soil. The every-day moccasin has no decoration or bead work, being a simple foot covering of tanned deer or antelope skin, with a rawhide sole, sewed and laced with sinew.

After Colonel Carson's campaign among the Navajos, in many exciting and interesting chapters, a thrilling experience in Indian service participated in by our Indiana Carson soldier, was a charge made in November, 1864, from Fort Bascom, eastern New Mexico, across the "panhandle" of Texas, against aggressive Kiowas and Comanches. Colonel Kit Carson was in command and Major Wm. McCleave, a regular Irish fighter, second only to Carson in skill and prowess among the Indians, was second in command; the troops consisting of 275 enlisted men of the First Cavalry, New Mexican volunteers, First Cavalry California Volunteers and First Veteran Infantry California Volunteers, together with mountain howitzers, in charge of Captain Pettis, First Veteran Infantry California Volunteers. The third day out from the fort, near Palo Duro creek, Kit Carson said to Major McCleave: "We shall have Indian fighting tomorrow." "How do you know?" asked McCleave, no Indian trails yet being visible. "I smell 'em," was the veteran Indian scout's reply. Next morning at 4 o'clock, after a day and night's travel of thirty-five or forty miles, an Indian picket was driven in and by daylight, before breakfast time, the troops came upon the first rancho, composed of seventeen

Indian lodges. The ammunition train, with one hundred men, was in the rear, but Carson immediately charged his soldiers through the settlement pell-mell, driving the Indians out. Two miles down stream the command came upon a band of 1,500 to 2,000 Kiowas and Comanches in camp. The hills and valleys were covered with cattle and stock as the troops sighted the camp, but in fifteen minutes not a hoof was to be seen, the squaws having driven off the cattle and the bucks having mounted the ponies.

#### SOME LIVELY FIGHTING.

Colonel Carson and his men charged the village – charge after charge – which the Indians returned in good military style. Meanwhile Captain Pettis and battery arrived, mounted on a knoll, and opened fire with shell. At this the Kiowas and Comanches retreated, with the announced verdict that they “couldn’t stand a gun which shoots twice” – a vivid description of the startling surprise conveyed by the explosive shell.

On the retreat of the Indians Carson’s men were withdrawn to the river, half a mile away, and allowed to get breakfast. Before the coffee was ready to drink, however, the yelling Indians charged again; and Colonel Carson deployed half his men as skirmishers, while the other half ate their breakfast; they, in turn, relieving the skirmishers, firing on both sides going on all the time. Dr. Needham describes breakfast garnished with Comanche war whoops as not quite the most composing diet known to his experience. After breakfast all of the horses were sent to the rear and the soldiers fought lying down in sand over shoe-top deep from 9 o’clock until 12, the Indians remaining mounted, fighting in three reserves. About 12 o’clock the red men fired the grass to burn out the soldiers or to make smoke so they could run into it and shoot under its cover. A back fire was ordered by Kit Carson, and as soon as it reached the horses they were again moved to the rear. After this the men lay on the hot ground, still fighting. At 4 o’clock in the afternoon a hot hand-to-hand fight occurred between a mounted detachment of the First California Cavalry, their thirty Ute Indian guides and the Kiowas and Comanches. In this engagement three soldiers and five Utes were killed; on the other side, loss unknown, but the Indians were temporarily routed. As ammunition was getting short a retreat was ordered to the train, ten miles in the rear, fighting every inch of the ground. At 10 o’clock at night the train was reached and a welcome reinforcement of 100 fresh men. A night attack was expected, but it did not occur, and, next morning, not an Indian was to be seen. In this campaign but few of Carson’s men were killed, while many Kiowas and Comanches dropped and were carried off.

In all Indian warfare, Dr. Needham holds, two conditions contribute to the peril and the exhilaration: the crafty, tricky nature of the Indian, and the rugged character of the country over which he has to be pursued. The white man stands up to fight, but the Indian creeps, skulks, dodges

from bush to bush, and the soldier has always to wonder whether the red warrior won't catch him before he catches the red warrior. Except in case of ambush, the government losses were not heavy, soldiers being good marksmen and the Indians inferior shooters. To fight Indians with any degree of success, however, the white man has to meet them on their own rules of etiquette – creep, skulk, hide and otherwise “play Indian.”

#### THE CANYON DUCHESNE.

During the campaign with the Navajos a detachment of 200 picked men from Colonel Carson's regiment, under Capt. Albert H. Pfeiffer, of Company H – a famous Indian fighter and scout, and a man whose company of Mexicans had once mutinied, shooting him almost to pieces – was detailed to accomplish what was jocosely known as “the cleaning out of Canyon Duchesne.” This famous canyon, then the hotbed of the Navajo tribe, was about three miles long, 200 to 300 feet wide, lying between Fort Defiance and the Wasach mountains. A shallow stream coursed through the center of the canyon, and its perpendicular cliffs of red sandstone, from 1,000 to 1,200 feet high, seemed almost to come together at the top, so narrow was the strip of blue sky which could be seen by looking upward. In the walls of these sheer cliffs were the caves of the Navajos, hollowed in the rock, and reached only by rude steps made in the face of the picturesque sandstone. It was November, and snow was on the ground, when the soldiers entered the canyon, with instructions to discipline the swarming Indians in their inaccessible strongholds. The charge was made on foot, as the bed of the canyon was impassible to horses. Two “jackass batteries,” or small cannon mounted on mule saddles constructed for that purpose, constituted the artillery backing the infantry. The detail was to enter at the head of the canyon and meet the rest of the regiment at the other end. They were at once attacked by the Navajos, who fired upon them from the sides and tops of the cliffs. The Kit Carson men returned the salute in kind, assisted by the batteries, and the “gun music,” Dr. Needham avers, supplemented by the Navajo yells and the noise of the rocks which they rolled down upon the soldiers made a war uproar beyond imagination. A battery shell fired into one of the caves killed, it was afterward learned, fifty or sixty Indians, one squaw being the sole survivor. Carson's soldiers made the passage of Canyon Duchesne with but the loss of one man, three being wounded. The red cliffs were spotted white where many bullets had hit, firing from the bottom being necessarily inaccurate. This Navajo engagement, while complete in all exciting and dangerous elements of Indian warfare, was not considered a military success, and the regiment returned to the fort. Canyon Duchesne had been previously raided by General Sumner, with equally unsatisfactory results.

In the winter of 1862, when Fort Sumner was newly established, Company M, of Carson's command, was a part of the garrison, the fort

was really nothing more than a camp, no buildings having been erected and the soldiers living in tents. The cavalry troops were occupied in scouting to protect the fort from Indian surprises, and at one time, while on the alert for several weeks against a reported approach of the Texas Rangers via the Lluna Estaccada, numerous dashes were made to the Texan border to guard against unheralded attacks from that quarter. No sutler's store was yet in operation at the camp, and in January or February the supply of tobacco gave out. As officers and men used a goodly quantity of this chief solace of the Western soldiers, the situation was disturbing. Officers were irritable and men as cross as they dared be, with tobacco no nearer than Fort Stanton, 125 miles distant in the Capitan mountains, the wild country between being thickly infested by Apaches and Musculares, both known as "bad citizens."

#### A TOBACCO EXPEDITION.

In March, 1863, Captain Updegraff, commanding officer, decided to send some dispatches to Fort Stanton, and at the same time obtain tobacco. Captain Deus, of Company M, was instructed to detail three men for the trip, and Lieut. Hugh J. Needham, with two Mexicans as guides, left the fort on the hazardous errand at 3 o'clock in the afternoon with two pack animals in charge. Fifteen miles were made before camping the first night, only the howls of wolves disturbing the stillness. The next day fifty miles were safely covered and a water hole reached just at nightfall. Fresh pony tracks not more than an hour or two old were there discovered, and fighting time seemed desperately near at hand. Little sleep visited the men that night. After an early morning start – not in the blithest spirits, three men being small odds against a possible fifty or seventy-five Apache bucks – the little expedition ascended a knoll, or mesa, to spy with relief a drove of wild mustangs, innocent perpetrators of the alarming fresh pony tracks seen the night before. Fort Stanton was reached the next day, and the tobacco relief party, with the precious weed in store, was escorted back to Fort Sumner by a small detachment of Company E, First Cavalry, New Mexican Volunteers. A party of citizens was murdered by the Apaches on this trail to Fort Stanton shortly after Lieutenant Needham and the Mexicans had made the trip described.

Colonel Carson's regiment in August, 1863, had been in camp near the Zuni villages and was on the way to Little Colorado river, in the Apache country. The first watering place, half way between the villages and the river, is known as "Jacob's well." This remarkable well is a clear pool of water – depth unknown, said to be running water – situated at the bottom of a big hole in the ground one hundred feet in diameter, sloping to a space about thirty-five feet in diameter. The well is visited in single file by a narrow trail down the side of the grassy brink. Carson's men had had two long days' travel over the jornada, or prairie, without water, men and horses alike, and had been on the trail part of the previous night. When

camp was ordered after Jacob's well was reached at 9 o'clock Kit Carson was not to be found. In much alarm a party of soldiers started out to find their missing colonel. They followed his horse's tracks five or six miles and finally came up with him. The vigilant and fearless Indian fighter was discovered with his head on the pommel of his saddle sound asleep.

As a student of the Indian in reservation life as observed at that time near Fort Sumner, where there were from 10,000 to 12,000 Apaches and Navajos, Dr. Needham believes that the red man may have acquired vices from his pale-faced brother but his industrious tendency to vice is all his own. The reservation Indian was an inveterate gambler. When the Indian drew army rations for his family he frequently gambled it all away between the fort and his home on the reservation. The Apache Indian of those days always saved a portion of his rations of corn, ground it between rocks and converted it into a liquor, which he called "tis-ween." On this beverage the Apaches would indulge in frequent wild orgies, during which yells and "gun music" made day and night hideous until the supply was exhausted. Of the aloe root they also made an intoxicating drink, called "muscal." When Carson's men were at Fort Sumner 4,000 acres of land were under cultivation there for the benefit of the Indians, the soldiers, however, doing the labor, the reservation Indians being too lazy to till the ground for themselves. For convenience in issuing rations to the Indians, square tin tags, stamped by a metal die representing a horse's head, were made of old canned beef tin and distributed to the Apaches and Navajos at the heads of families on the reservation. The noble red man secured old tin and counterfeited these tags so perfectly that the bogus tags were not discovered for a long time, thus securing to himself extra quantities of rations. To circumvent this trickery brass tags were ordered from the States for government use.

#### THEIR MANUAL SKILL.

As artificers in metal the reservation Indians were remarkably skillful. A Navajo would take a silver half-dollar, beat it out as thin as a wafer, bend it into a shallow cup, engrave it with rude tools in various curious signs and symbols, solder to its convex side an eyelet, and then fasten it as an ornament on his pony's headgear with great satisfaction. The much-admired Navajo blanket Dr. Needham describes as being woven in the simplest fashion imaginable. Wherever a Navajo can put sticks up in the ground he can begin to weave a blanket. He clips the wool from his sheep, colors it with his own dyes, and as he weaves rolls the blanket up on a stick which hangs from the rude loom on which the work is done. Among the Navajoes the bucks knit and the most of the weaving is done by the squaws. When purchased direct from the Navajoes nearly all of these brilliant blankets were vermin-infested, but the experienced purchaser found it an easy matter to place the blanket over a Mexican

ant hill, where the industrious ant made short work of all foreign invaders ambuscaded in the wool.

Kit Carson was twice married, his first wife being a Ute squaw; his second marriage was with a Mexican woman. Of this marriage one son was born and during the civil war this son was United States marshal at Taos, New Mexico. The last time Dr. Needham saw Colonel Carson was in October, 1866, at Maxwell's ranch, on the Raton river, southeast of Fort Union, on the old California trail. He was then quite ill and not expected to live, but did live until 1867, when he died at Fort Lyon, en route to Fort Harker. In 1866 he was brevetted brigadier general of volunteers, and was immensely proud of the glory of a star on his shoulder. While he could speak Spanish like a Mexican and knew many Indian tongues, he never forgot his broad, native Kentucky dialect, and said "bar" for "bear" to the end of his days.

When the civil war ended and Hugh John Needham's term of service on the Indian trail closed he was twenty-three years old, had received an arrow wound, a gunshot wound and a commission as lieutenant. Since that time an occasional small, exclusive but spirited "Kit Carson campfire" has been held in New Albany; Mr. John Ritter, of Valparaiso, treasurer of Porter county, being the only other Indiana man who was in the first New Mexican Volunteers under Colonel Kit Carson.

- EMMA CARLETON.

New Albany, June 9.

[Source: Emma Nunemacher Carleton Scrapbook #4, p. 76, undated newspaper clipping, although "1899" is handwritten on the clipping.]