



Was **Kit Carson** a
swashbuckling **hero**
or cold-blooded
genocidal **maniac**?

The truth is somewhere
in the middle.

Hampton Sides

With Robert Wilder

Photos by Blair Clark

Hampton Sides is editor-at-large for *Outside* magazine and the author of the international best seller *Ghost Soldiers*, which was the basis for the 2005 film “The Great Raid.” His new book, *Blood and Thunder*, chronicles the life of Kit Carson and the American conquest of the West. Dreamworks has optioned the film rights to *Blood and Thunder*. Robert Wilder spoke to Sides, a resident of Santa Fe, at the Museum Hill Café.

Wilder: You grew up in Memphis. Did you have a feeling for history growing up in the South?

Sides: I got interested in narrative history in large part because of meeting Shelby Foote, the first writer I’d ever met. His son was a friend of mine. I used to play over his house a lot while he was working on the final volume of the trilogy of *The Civil War*. He looked like a writer, smelled like a writer, straight out of central casting. To me he was just this eccentric writer dude until I was at my first job as a reporter at *Memphis* magazine. I did five hours of interviews of Shelby Foote and boiled it down into this interview series we were running at the time. That’s when I began to realize what he had done, what an achievement it was, and I had done my part to disrupt his final volume by playing Hendrix really loud in his house.

Wilder: You refer to yourself as a narrative or popular historian. What exactly does that mean?

Sides: I think of myself as a journalist who writes about history. My background is in magazine journalism, but I’ve done radio journalism, newspapers. I think I attack a historical subject more like a journalist would by trying to find areas that are of contemporary interest and relevance and still have a pulse even if they are over 150 years old. *Ghost Soldiers*—even though it’s history—I viewed as journalism

because it was based almost entirely on interviews. I did a lot of reading too, but the part that really animated me was the interviews. I feel I have a rapport with people, especially old people. I like old people.



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Wilder: Tell me a little bit about your research for *Blood and Thunder*. Did you visit sites like the Bosque Redondo Memorial at Fort Sumner or spend time in Canyon de Chelly?

Sides: I think you need to understand the real estate. You need to be able to describe what it looks like and what the weather's like. It's also a feeling of confidence when I'm writing a scene about a place where I've been. If I haven't been there—even if I have plenty of documents to fill in the blanks—I feel like a fraud or phony. Just about every place in *Blood and Thunder* that I could go to I went to. I traveled the length of the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail. I went to Sutter's Fort in California and the site of the battle of the San Pasqual from the Mexican war near San Diego.

Wilder: Did you drag the family in the station wagon and go to these places?

Sides: At a certain point during this project my kids couldn't stand Kit Carson. They'd roll their eyes and say, "There goes Dad again, going on about Kit Carson." But one of the good things about Kit Carson is that since he went everywhere in North America, practically, we could build family vacations around his wanderings and go. For example, my son McCall went to nationals last year in snowboarding in Truckee, California, which was one of the places Kit Carson went on one of his [General John Charles] Fremont expeditions, so I left McCall on the mountain and went off to do some research.

Wilder: Because there wasn't a definitive biography or text on Carson, it's obvious that you've had to construct his life by piecing together many sources. Do you feel that you portrayed him well?

Sides: Once I've finished a book, I can't really sit down and read it. I don't really know if I've succeeded, but judging by the reactions of other people, I think I've made him interesting, compelling, and somewhat contemporary. The problem with Kit Carson was that there were only two real portrayals of him: a swashbuckling hero or a cold-blooded genocidal maniac. How do you reconcile those two? The truth was somewhere in the middle. He was, in some ways, both of those things at the same time in the same person.

Wilder: I find the "scorched earth" policy toward the Navajo one of the most disturbing parts of the book. It's not the bloodiest, but the idea of starving and burning to destroy a culture is hard to imagine. Did you get your head around how Carson, who seemed like a decent human in some ways, could consider and then enact such a terrible thing?

Sides: That's the central debate about Kit Carson's life. He was a soldier, and soldiers of that day, any more than soldiers of today, are not at liberty to pick and choose the policies they believe in. He did try to resign on several occasions and get a leave of absence during the heat of the battle to try to avoid the whole Canyon de Chelly campaign. He clearly found it distasteful, he didn't want to be there, he wasn't feeling well. This scorched earth policy was [Major General James Henry] Carleton's idea

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and was approved by Lincoln. The other thing that was going on with Carson was he was almost a tribal character in the sense that tribal loyalty was important to him. His tribe was the Spanish. He'd married into a Spanish family, spoke Spanish in his household, and most of his friends were Hispanic in Taos. The last words he ever spoke were Spanish. Public enemy number one among the Mexicans was the Navajo. The other thing is that he had befriended the Ute Indians. He referred to them as "his tribe." He liked to ride with them, fight with them, and again, the number one enemy of the Utes were the Navajos. It was almost a *Gangs of New York* mentality: the enemy of my friend is my enemy. One other factor that I didn't talk about in the book is that the guy needed money. He had eight children, and even though he was world famous, even though he'd been mentioned in *Moby Dick*, compared favorably to Hercules, he was dirt poor. The only way he could consistently make a living was to stay with the army. That sounds absolutely terrible, but money had to be a big factor.

Wilder: Your book *Ghost Soldiers* recounts the Bataan Death March in World War II. It seems as if the Navajo's Long Walk could have been told in a similar manner. Why did you decide to center the book around Kit Carson instead?

Sides: I started at the Long Walk with my research. It was going to be about Kit Carson's conquest of the Navajo, the Long Walk, their captivity and return home. Then, in order to answer the questions, "Why was the United States at war with the Navajo?" and "Who were the Navajo?" and "Who was Kit Carson and why was he a household name in the 1860s?" I had to go back a ways. The book kept growing backwards. I'd say all right, I'm going to start in the early 1860s, right around the Civil War. I didn't think many people were aware that there were Civil War battles in New Mexico. But then I realized Kit Carson became famous in the 1840s when he had all these amazing exploits. Also the Navajos' story of how they dealt with the United States goes back to the 1840s with [Navajo warrior and chieftain] Narbona and



[General Stephen Watts] Kearny. The book kept cell dividing backwards in order to answer all these questions. It ended up taking two years longer than I expected. What kept the book from exploding beyond recognition was Kit Carson. He made it a bigger book, but he also made it a smaller book at the same time since you never get too far from his life story.

Wilder: What is your next book going to be about?

Sides: I'm writing a book about the assassination of Martin Luther King and the search for James Earl Ray. It was the largest manhunt in American history, took two months before they caught him in London. I want to write about Memphis, where I grew up. 1968 was a really interesting time, a lot of stuff was happening, even over at Graceland in the jungle room. Elvis was at the peak of his career; a lot of stuff at Stax records; Isaac Hayes did *Hot Buttered Soul* that year. A lot of things were going on racially, and it was a creative time. I kind of want to capture the city and what was happening. It's very different from *Blood and Thunder* with its forty years of history and thousands of miles of real estate. This new book is essentially a two-month period; that's how long it took to capture James Early Ray. He was captured on the day that Robert Kennedy was killed, so there are bookends. I didn't want to sprawl this time. I think it'll be a nice change to write something like a thriller. ■

NOTE: *Blood and Thunder* is available at the Palace of the Governors Shop and the Colleen Cloney Duncan Shop at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. *Ghost Soldiers* is available at the Palace of the Governor's Shop. Both books can be purchased online at www.shopmuseum.com.

Interviewer Robert Wilder's fiction and essays have been nominated for numerous awards, including The Pushcart Prize. He is the director of the Southwest Literary Center of Recursos de Santa Fe and on the faculty of Santa Fe Preparatory School. His column, "Daddy Needs a Drink," is published monthly in the Santa Fe Reporter. *Daddy Needs a Drink* is his first book. Photo by Jennifer Esperanza.

