BUFFALO HUNTERS: John Carter, Pony Express Rider and the Paiute War (January 1860)
By Bob Fincham

James Washington, Baptist Jim, and John Carter were sitting around the campfire one night in July of 1867. They were camped outside of Fort Laramie waiting for the army to load their wagons. They were contracted to deliver assorted supplies to the forts on the Bozeman Trail. Washington was a former First Sergeant in the 13th United States Colored Troops during the recent war. Carter had served in a Texas regiment, and Baptist Jim had served from a pulpit.

Washington and Carter were partners who hunted buffalo during the winter and used their wagons for hauling freight in the summer. Baptist Jim had joined them in the freight business earlier this year. He was a bounty hunter when he was not hauling cargo.

Jim noticed Carter rubbing his side and grimacing while they were sharing a bottle of whiskey before turning in for the night.

Jim said, “What’s wrong? Are you getting’ old?”

“No, I have an old wound that acts up once in a while,” Carter said.

“War wound?”

“A reminder of my days ridin’ with the Pony Express.”

“Aren’t you kind of big for a Pony Express rider? I always thought they were skinny little runts.”

“Believe it or not, I used to be a string-bean of a fella. I was just over a hundred pounds soaking wet. In some ways, I was embarrassed by my size. Here I was, a grown man in my twenties and pretty much of a runt.”

“I also had a chip on my shoulder and ready to fight at the slightest hint of an insult. I was a good shot with a pistol but not very fast on the draw. I preferred to do my fighting with my fists, even though the other guy, or guys, constantly had at least twenty pounds on me. When we finished, I always had their respect. Sometimes I won, and sometimes I lost, but I never went down easy.”

“Finding a job was hard for a guy of my size until I discovered the Pony Express. I was working part-time for a freight company called Russell, Majors, and Waddell. I helped clean stables and tended oxen at their Carson City warehouse.”

“During the winter of 1860, they put together an operation called the Pony Express to carry mail between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California. Mailbags would be carried on horseback over 2000 miles and take about ten days. It would be faster than any other method by a wide margin.”

“Word spread fast about their search for riders. They wanted young men who weighed less than 120 pounds who were tough and single. At first, I thought only a fool would take a job like that. Riding a horse at breakneck speeds over rough roads and trails, much of it through Indian country, was not very appealing. Even without the Indians, a rider had to cover a hundred miles each time he carried the bag. The western part of the route was across the Nevada Desert and included several dangerous river crossings.”

“When I heard the wage was a hundred dollars a month, I applied and got hired. It was one time I was glad about my size. They believed me when I lied about my age.”
Since I knew how to handle my fists and a gun, I got a route across the Great Basin in Nevada that included part of the Utah-Nevada Desert.”

“First, we had to build and stock all of the stations. There must have been 200 of them spread out all along the route from St. Joe to Sacramento. They tried to put one every 15 to 20 miles apart. The rider was expected to change horses at each station without a pause. I used to be able to jump off my horse, grab the mail pouch, throw it onto the fresh horse, and mount while the horse was already moving out.”

“Of course, those days are long gone now. Sometimes, I can’t believe all the pep and vinegar I had during my younger days.”

“It was March of 1860 when I reported to the Carson Sink Station. It was in the last stages of construction. The men were making adobe and building a small fort. That made sense to me since I was in the heart of Paiute country.”

“The work was almost done. The alkali in the mud had swollen the workers’ feet to where they could hardly walk. Stompin’ that mud into adobe was downright painful.”

“I spent April of that year riding back and forth between Friday’s Station near Lake Tahoe and Smith’s Creek Station in the Nevada Desert. Then in May, the Paiute War started.”

“Did they cause you any problems?” Baptist Jim asked.

“A few,” Carter answered as he pulled up his shirt. He pointed at three different scars and said, “The one in my shoulder was from an arrow. So was the one here on my side. The one on the center of my chest I got from a rifle slug. That one almost did me in.”

“Is there a story behind each one?” Jim asked.

“No, there ain’t a story for each one. I got all three at pretty much the same time.”

“I was carryin’ the mail east from Buckland’s Station when I came upon a big fight at William’s Station. A war party of Paiutes was attacking the station. The horses had been driven off or stolen, and the buildings were starting to burn. The men inside were yelling and shooting as the flames moved toward them.”

“I had to figure a way around the attack before I got spotted, but I had waited too long. A bunch of Paiutes saw me, and I had to run for it.”

“I had already ridden my horse over sixty miles, but he was a real mustang and one tough critter. Now he needed to run another twenty miles with a pack of blood-thirsty Indians after us. He’d have to run faster than ever before.”

“We managed to keep our lead on them and even stretched it out to the point where they looked like a lot of little bugs way behind us. I thought for sure I was gonna get away until my Mustang went down. I never did find out why. It might’ve been a hole in the road, or he just got worn out. Either way, I was in deep trouble.”

“I was five miles from Carson Sink and without a horse. I had the mail pouch, a pistol, two good legs, a canteen of water, and a passel of Paiutes comin’ up fast.”

“I spotted a cluster of rocks on some high ground not too far off the road where I figured I should be able to hold out for a while. I climbed into the rocks and waited for trouble to arrive.”

“There were ten or eleven Paiutes in the bunch chasin’ me. I could’ve picked a few of them off as they got closer, but my rifle was at Buckland’s Station beside my bunk. It was extra weight, and I needed speed when ridin’.”
“I had five shots in my pistol and another twenty rounds or so in my belt. I took six of them out and set them on the rock in front of me so I could do a quick reload. I also put a sixth round into my pistol. I always have the hammer setting on an empty chamber in case it gets bumped. I had bought a Bowie knife when I got my first paycheck, and I always had it on me. I sat it on the rock by the extra cartridges.”

“The Paiutes stopped just out of rifle range. Five of them split off to circle behind me. At least they would not be able to get above me since I held the high ground. “

“They did some talkin’ among themselves like they was buildin’ up enough courage to rush me or giving the five what split off time to get behind me.”

“I wanted to get things goin’ before that happened. I stood on a large rock and made lewd gestures at them. They got angry and charged before the other five got behind me.”

“They rode up to the base of my rock pile. They were within killin’ range of my pistol for a short time before getting among the rocks. I emptied my revolver with six quickly aimed shots. I knocked two of them off their ponies and winged a third. The other three dismounted and came running up among the rocks hollerin’ and firing arrows at me.”

“I did a quick reload of my pistol and shifted my position a few feet to one side. I held my Bowie in my right hand and my pistol in the other. The Paiutes were making a lot of noise as they charged my old position. Each one had taken a different route through the rocks. One was almost on me, so I crouched low, and when he came around my new spot, I surprised him with a knife in the belly. He probably thought I was still in the same position.”

“I was pulling my knife out of his body when I heard some pebbles rattle behind me. I turned in time to get hit in the side with an arrow. It was fired at close range and damn near went through me from front to back. I had shot at the same time and hit the warrior in the chest, killing him. I still don’t know how I managed that shot.”

“The last of this bunch came into view, and before I could duck, he shot me with a rifle. Lucky it was an old single-shot rifle, and the cartridge powder must have been old or wet at one time. The slug knocked me back against a rock and embedded itself deep into my chest muscles where a rib stopped it.”

“As he worked at reloading, I fell along the rock and fired a shot. It went high and hit him in the face. He dropped back out of sight, probably dead. If he had rushed me instead of trying to reload, the fight would have ended right there.”

“I was in bad shape, and I heard the other bunch comin’ through the rocks on the other side of my position. I could still use both arms, but with a lot of pain. I don’t know what hurt worse, my chest, or my side. I snapped the feathered end off the arrow and found I could still walk, just barely.”

Putting my Bowie back into its sheath, I grabbed the mailbag and dragged it behind me as I worked my way down to where the first bunch of Paiutes had left their ponies. The wounded one was watching them, but he lay on the ground, dead or unconscious, I don’t know which.”

I heard some yelling from higher up in the rocks. I figured they found their dead friends and saw I had moved away. I threw the mail pouch on the back of a pony and stood on some rocks to mount it. As I seated myself, another arrow hit me in the shoulder. It was fired from some distance and didn’t go very deep. I was in so much pain from my other wounds that I hardly noticed it.”
“Arrows started falling around me as the Paiutes saw me taking one of their ponies. Luckily, none of them had rifles, or I’d be a dead man.”

“I kicked the pony in the ribs and skedaddled out of there. Until they got to their ponies and circled back around, I knew I’d be way ahead of them.”

“I had to cover five miles to the Carson Sink Station before I could get any help. There would be men there and the adobe fort I helped build. I just had to get there before I either passed out or bled to death from my wounds.”

“When I got there, I was nearly passed out. The station-master and two riders were at the station. The riders were just kids and didn’t know how to help me. One of them took off with the mail as soon as I arrived. That was always the priority.”

“The station-master had a live-in squaw who went right to work on me. After a few good swallows of whiskey, I was conscious and feeling very little pain. The arrow in my side was the first wound she bandaged. Since it had almost gone through me, the steel point was sticking out my back. She gripped it and gave it a hard, sharp pull, yanking it free of the wound. Some blood gushed out, and she stopped it with a hot poker from the cookstove. Whiskey or not, it hurt like hell as it sizzled into my flesh. I even remember the smell of burnt hair and meat. She packed a poultice on each hole and wrapped a cloth around me.”

“The arrow in my shoulder was not very deep. The squaw enlarged the wound with a hot knife and pulled it free. She threw it to the side and hit me with the hot poker once more.”

“As she was digging and burning, I was swilling whiskey like there was no tomorrow. She leaned me back and used that same knife to dig the bullet out of my chest. Then she used that hot poker for the last time as I lay flat on my back in an alcohol-induced fog. Two days later, I was sober and hungry. Up to then, I was surviving on whiskey for the pain.”

“I spent ten days recovering at the station. When I was able to move around without tearing anything open, they kept me on light duty for another two weeks. Finally, they gave me a short run west to Hooten Wells Station. I wasn’t able to go at full speed, but I made good time anyway.”

“The Paiutes were still causing trouble and hitting stations, but I didn’t see any on this particular run. They appeared to be most active farther east, around the Cold Springs Station.”

“The Paiute War ended after about eight weeks of fightin’ and killin’. I didn’t have any more run-ins with them, but outlaws were another problem that cropped up from time to time. I’ll tell you about them another time. Now I gotta get some sleep.”

Carter took a long swig from the bottle and tossed it to Jim. He stood and walked over to his bedroll where he settled in for the night.