

Legendary

THE MAGICIAN

"Chuck" Carson lived with the Ute Indians in Northern New Mexico for over two months. Not by choice either, for the Indians had captured him and he had at least postponed a horrible death at their hands by resorting to his ingenuity. "Chuck" was quick-witted and a very quick thinker. He had come from ~~the~~ Missouri in the early 1800s to locate a trail through the southwest to southern California. This was before the gold rush. In an Indian raid he had become lost from his companions and had been captured. He was a man of thirty or forty years at the time and very often his fast thinking had saved his life.

"Chuck's" magnifying glass, his hunting knife with a disappearing blade, and his fire-water in a bottle enabled him to show the Indians tricks which caused them to consider him a magician or super-medicine man.

"Chuck's" luck was not to last. The fire-water ran out and the other tricks became common-place after awhile, and the Indians began to wonder if they had been tricked. "Chuck" realized his disadvantage and at great risk and in an unguarded moment succeeded in making his escape. His capturers and guards were soon on his trail. He made his way down out of the canyon and followed along the fringe of the mountains where he could get water and where the wind was not so cold and headed for the Raton mountains hoping to make it safely to the Kansas country and on to safety.

Even as fast as he traveled, the Indians were a little faster and along in the evening he ~~was~~ realized that the Indians were soon going to overtake him. "Chuck" traveled as rapidly as possible but his horse

needed rest as he also did. It was difficult riding without a saddle. He finally decided that both must have rest and he dismounted and threw himself upon the ground.

He was numb with the cold and he decided to risk a very small fire over which he could cook some meat, which he had brought with him. A fire was greatly needed to warm over before continuing into the night. To his great surprise his camp fire burned exceedingly bright and did not burn out as the fuel diminished, and as he watched, it got brighter and larger until he became alarmed for fear that its brightness would attract the Indians whom he knew were not very far behind him. He took his hunting knife and quickly cut some branches from the nearby evergreens and beat the fire out; as he worked he planned, for he was recognizing his great opportunity.

The fire extinguished, he sat down to wait the coming of the Indians and he did not have long to wait. The five big bucks rode into the clearing and drew to a halt, surprised to see "Chuck" apparently waiting for them. He addressed them, and told them that they had doubted his ability of late and to prove that he really had great powers, like they had not yet seen, he would produce ever-burning flames, powerful enough to consume them at his command. Their silence spoke the doubts within their minds. So he proceeded to light the fire again. By digging around in the ground a little it blazed twice as high as his head with no apparent source of fuel. The Indians were amazed and soon were begging that he refrain from harming them. They believed that escape was the best thing when a man had power like that, so they backed out of the clearing and galloped away southward and homeward, glad to be out of the clearing, and out of the clutches of this magician.

This left "Chuck" free to warm by the fire which was too large now to extinguish, and to proceed on to safety and freedom.

For over 100 years the fire, fed by an underground supply of natural gas, has been burning, about a mile from the present site of Van Houten, New Mexico—a coal camp—. Neither wind, rain, nor snow affect its burning, and at night it can be seen for miles, especially on nights when some new under-ground passage gives up a new supply of gas.

The ever-burning spot is about ten feet square. For thirty feet in any direction a few scratches on the ground bring forth the flames. Picnics are common at the spot. Individuals take delight in using a stick to write their names on the surface of the ground, watching the flames burn up through the ground, and continue for several minutes to spell out the letters in fire.

(Alice Wade Bullock)
—relater.