FROM WHITTLE'S FERRY TO THE LAVA BEDS:
THE BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT AND MATILDA WHITTLE

By Susan G. Rambo

This issue of the Trumpeter will tell the story of Robert and Matilda Whittle of Whittle's Ferry (Keno), Oregon. Although some is known about the Whittles, we must rely on many sources to paint a picture of their lives.

ROBERT WHITTLE

Robert Whittle was born about 1827 or 1828 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He came to San Francisco in 1850 as a sailor aboard a ship. A young man of twenty-three years, Robert found that gold was much more enticing than the seas. He headed north to Yreka, where he bought some land on the south side of Miners Street.

While in Yreka, he met up with Henry Francis Picard. Whittle and Picard made many trips north to the Klamath country as trappers and fishermen during the 1850's and 1860's. Whittle caught fish at "Fishing Falls", west of Keno. These were annual trips up the Klamath River from Yreka. He brought back salmon, salmon trout and silverside and sold them to the miners. A June 1868 article in the Yreka Journal reported Whittle had brought into town fish from Klamath Lake that "were splendid eating".

Whittle had taken a Shasta Indian wife. There was a daughter born of this union in 1852 or '53. She was given the name of Caroline. It is assumed that Caroline's mother died within two years of Caroline's birth.

The July 19, 1860 census for Siskiyou County lists him as
age thirty-two, a miner, with real estate valued at $25.00 and personal estate valued at $160.00. He is again listed in 1866 as a fisherman and a resident of Yreka.

Whittle was a teamster and had a freighting operation hauling freight from Yreka to Linkville over the Topsy Grade Road. Apparently, he also used water transportation in his operation: the *Yreka Journal* of May 19, 1865 reported that "...Bob Whittle lately transported 1300 pounds of freight in a boat on the Klamath Lakes towards Fort Klamath. The freight was taken to the lakes from Yreka, and is the first attempt of the kind ever made."

In 1868 Whittle built a cabin in the present-day Keno area. He also established a boat landing and a ferry business.

The most likely location for the cabin and ferry was on a thirty-three acre parcel he purchased near the old Needle dam. A deed recorded in 1873 reflected the purchase price of $67.60.

About this same time he helped to improve and establish the Topsy Grade road as a public highway.

In the March 6, 1868 issue of the *Yreka Journal* the Topsy Grade Route was endorsed as the best route year around. Whittle, Picard and a Mr. Woodruff had posted notices of intention to apply to the Board of Supervisors asking that the route be declared a public highway.

Apparently he maintained, at least for awhile, his fishing business.

A reference is made to Whittle's fishing in a memoir written by Ellen Hiatt Fulkerson who had settled in the Keno area with her husband. She and Caroline Whittle had become friends in the summer of 1868. Caroline would bring her canoe over and the two of them would go fishing. If Ellen wasn't having good luck, Caroline would insist that Ellen try her pole and line. Ellen states that she didn't like to do that because Caroline was catching the fish for her father to take to market in Yreka.

Later that year, Caroline married Henry Francis Picard, Whittle's trapping companion.
MATILDA WHITTLE

Matilda Whittle was Klamath Indian. She was born in the Klamath country in 1842. It is unknown when she received the name "Matilda" or what her Indian birth name was. The author's husband recalls his grandmother, Grace Allen Rambo (who was Robert and Matilda's granddaughter), talking about an ancestor whose Indian name meant "froggy-on-her-back"; possibly this was Matilda's birth name.

She was camped along Williamson River, near its mouth at Upper Klamath Lake at the encampment known as "Yaak" when the village was attacked by J.C. Fremont and the Kit Carson group as retaliation for the Indian attack on Fremont's group at Denny Creek in 1846. Klamath Echoes, No. 5, Part 2, p. 47, 1967.

Little is known about Matilda's family. Perhaps her parents were killed in the attack by Carson and Fremont. Her brother was Link River Jack. She purportedly had a sister called "Mainstay" who followed Captain Jack to the Lava Beds. Alta California, Feb. 17, 1873. (Other than this one newspaper article, the author could find no other reference to "Mainstay". However, a Modoc woman named Martha "Mainstake" was captured at the Lava Beds; the similarity of names is thought-provoking.)

Link River Jack later became the chief of the Link River Indians. He was one of the signors to the 1864 Klamath Treaty with the U.S. Government. He was a friend of Captain Jack, although later during Captain Jack's trial, Captain Jack testified Link River Jack had supplied ammunition to him at the Lava Beds.

About 1854 Robert met Matilda, probably during one of his fishing trips to the area. He was a single parent with a two-year old child and he was in need of a caretaker for Caroline. It is probable Matilda initially assumed that role.

It is not known if she accompanied Robert on his return trips to Yreka or if she remained in this area until he returned.

In 1863 they were married. They most likely lived a nomadic lifestyle until the Keno property was purchased and the
cabin built. Robert and Matilda’s only child, Mary Elvira, was born in 1865 at John Fairchild’s ranch. The ranch was located along Cottonwood Creek in Siskiyou County, California and was a popular birthing home until the 1890’s. During the Modoc War, the ranch was used as headquarters by the Army.

THE MODOC CONFLICT-1873

The commencement of war in the Lava Beds created business for Robert’s ferry. Patrols from Ft. Klamath crossed the Klamath at Whistles Ferry. Robert charged the government fifty cents for each horseman, $1.50 for express wagons and $2.50 for a four horse wagon.

Indians being returned to the reservation were brought back through the ferry.

A band of 45 Modocs who had been living on Hot Creek and who had participated in none of the murders of Wendolyn Nus on November 29, 1872 were rounded up and headed northward to the reservation. They reached Bob Whittle’s ranch at Whittles Ferry, where they were met by a party of eight to ten drunken settlers, who left Linkville with the intention of avenging Nus’ death by seizing the Indians and hanging them. It was immaterial whether the Indians were guilty of any crime, they were Indians and that was enough. The Indians overheard talk and became frightened. They escaped to join Captain Jack at the Lava Beds.

THE INTERPRETERS

When we think of interpreters used by the Army at the Lava Beds conflict, we tend to think only of Toby ‘Winema’ Riddle. However, the Army used several interpreters. Obviously an interpreter had to speak both Indian and English. Indian women married to white men fit the bill. Both Matilda and Winema were used by the Army. Winema became well known because she was the interpreter present at the Peace Commission tent on April 11, 1873 when General Canby and the Reverend Thomas were killed. There, Winema, saved A.B. Meacham’s life. She was also used as the interpreter at Captain Jack’s trial. Her son Jeff wrote a
book about her.

Both Robert and Matilda saw active involvement in the Modoc Indian War of 1872-73. Their involvement in the peace negotiations earned them considerable fame at the time.

"Near the ferry is the residence of Robert Whittle and his wife Matilda, who were famous as interpreters and Lava Bed messengers during the peace negotiations of the Modoc War." Ashland Tidings, Jan. 4, 1878.

General Gillem believed that Matilda's sister, "Mainstay", was in the stronghold with Captain Jack and he initially proposed using daughter Caroline as interpreter. Alta California, Feb. 17, 1873.

Also it was common knowledge that Robert Whittle was on friendly terms with the local Indians and related by marriage to Captain Jack's friend - Link River Jack.

Ellen Hiatt Fulkerson recalled "Bob Whittle as 'a white man who... was the owner of a rancherie or ranch on the south bank of the Klamath River near Keno with quite a collection of Klamath Indians around him'. She also recalled Link River Jack passing by and stopping at her home located about a mile away. (Apparently enroute to visit his sister, Matilda.) Klamath Echoes, No. 13, pp. 6-7, 14-17.

Initially the Whittles refused, but later, on February 19, 1873, they agreed to serve at the request of the reorganized Peace Commission.

"Communications with the rebel camp had been suspended.... To reopen and establish it was the first work.... Living but a few miles distant was a man whose wife was a Klamath, and who was on friendly terms with the Modocs. This man, Bob Whittle, was sent for, with a request to bring his wife. On his arrival, we found him to be a man of sound judgment, and his wife, to be a well appearing woman, understanding the English language tolerably well." A.B. Meacham, Wigwam and Warpath, quoted in the Klamath Echoes, No. 7, p. 57.

"The Peace Commission's first action was to send Matilda, the Modoc (Klamath--writer) wife of ferryman Bob
Whittle, accompanied by another squaw, Artina Choakus..., to the Stronghold on February 19-20 to reestablish contact with Captain Jack. It was a chancy operation since no one yet knew how Jack would react to peace feelers—perhaps murderously. Matilda, for example, left her rings and other jewelry with her husband when she set out. But the squaws proved to be a good, brave team. Stephen Powers described Matilda in flattering terms: 'a woman of a strong, dark face, glittering eyes, slow and deliberate in speech and of an iron will—a good type of her race.'

"When Matilda Whittle returned safely to the Army camp, she reported that the Modocs were tired and running out of both clothes and provisions. She paraphrased Jack's words: 'We want no more war and are ready to wash our hands of blood.... We were pitched into by the military and citizens when we were asleep....' Jack wanted the blockade of the Lava Beds raised and said he was against the whites using squaws as couriers, observing, 'Women do not understand when men lie'.... Matilda said that Jack did not want to talk to reporters.... Mrs. Whittle also reported that Jack's influence appeared to be waning and that John Schonchin's star seemed to be rising...."

"On Washington's Birthday, (February 22), Whittle and 'Commissioner Matilda,' as the press corp dubbed her, returned from a second visit to Captain Jack's Cave. They had been met by forty-three Modoc warriors, armed like Mexican bandidos.... They were unanimous in saying that they did not really want to fight, although they now could fire ten shots for every one they had been able to spare in the January battle. They told (Whittle), 'We have not got mad yet. Your house is standing, so is Dorris', Van Bremer's....because we are not mad....'"

"And so it was that Fairchild, with Whittle and the squaws, (Matilda and Artina) met Captain Jack at the base of Gillem's Bluff...." Richard Dillon, Burnt-Out Fires, pp. 191-192.

Peace negotiations continued without success. On April 11, 1873 General Canby and Reverend Thomas were killed while engaged in negotiations with Captain Jack. General J.C. Davis replaced the slain General Canby. Efforts to bring in the Indians
intensified. The Army continued to use Matilda in their attempts to get the group to surrender.

On April 26, 1873 at the base of Hardin Butte the Army lost 20 men killed and 16 wounded in the affair known as the Thomas-Wright massacre. A Lt. Cranston and five men were missing.

"So disorganized was Davis' army... he dare not reconnoiter Hardin Butte to collect the bodies. Instead he fell back on the tried and true services of squaws such as Artina Choakus. He sent the ladies out on May 4, to find the missing Lt. Cranston and ascertain, if possible, Jack's position and strength."

"The ladies were gone 3 days and spent 18 hours without water. On May 6 they found the bodies and brought back the news that morale in Jack's army was declining." Dillon, p. 282; Erwin N. Thompson, Modoc War: Its Military History & Topography, p. 95.

Although not mentioned by name, it is probable Matilda was the other "lady" that went with Artina. Later, we learn "on May 20th, Fairchild told Davis that a Modoc woman had come into the ranch saying the Indians wanted to surrender. Davis then sent out the same two women who had found Cranston's body to go up the mountain, seek out the Modocs, and inform them of the terms of surrender." Thompson, p. 105.

"At 1 P.M. on May 22, 1873, the squaw, Matilda, galloped into Fairchild's ranch, her horse completely blown. Excitedly, she told the rancher that the Modocs, very near, were now ready to surrender if he, alone, would escort them in. No soldiers, they insisted. But they still had faith in Fairchild. 'Where is Artina?' asked (General) Davis. Matilda explained her delay: 'Tied up. Long ride. No water. No good.' Some suspected foul play, but tensions relaxed when Artina swept in on a foam-covered horse, to verify her friend's claim." Fairchild, a few cowhands and the squaws rode off to bring the Modocs in. Dillon, Burnt-Out Fires, p. 290.

Later that day, 69 Hot Creek Modoc Indians, men, women and children, surrendered to John Fairchild. They returned to his ranch. Captain Jack was not among them.
The next day four of those who surrendered, described as "the worst, mean, and blood-thirsty scoundrels in the whole Modoc band", were hired as scouts, by General Davis, to find Captain Jack. Francis S. Landrum, Guardhouse, Gallows and Graves, p. 13, 1988. The newly hired scouts and "the two Indian women who had been his messengers and scouts in the past" were sent back into the Lava Beds to find Captain Jack and persuade him to surrender. Thompson, p. 110.

On June 1, 1873, near the head of Langell Valley, the remnants of Captain Jack's army were captured.

At his "trial", July 5, 1873, Captain Jack spent considerable time trying to justify his conduct by blaming others for the failure of peace negotiations. Matilda did not escape comment. "Bob Whittle's (wife) came to see me and she told me that I was not her people, and she did not want to talk anything good to me. She always gave me bad advice. She told me that if she did not come back again right straight, that I might know the soldiers would be on to me the next day to fight me..." (Partial transcript of Captain Jack's trial testimony from Landrum, Guardhouse, Gallows and Graves, p. 127.)

On October 3, 1873 at 10:20 a.m. Captain Jack and three others were hung at Fort Klamath.

1873-1883

After the war, Whittles Ferry prospered. The ferry was located along the road from Yreka to Linkville near the intersection of the Ashland road. Traffic steadily increased.

Whittle increased his land holdings. In 1875 he acquired a 98 acre parcel along the Klamath River, beginning at approximately the current Whoa Tavern and extending 7/10 mile along the now Keno-Worden Road; part of which is now the 5th Addition to Klamath River Acres. (Note: the author currently resides on a portion of this acreage. In 1985, the author and her husband, Richard, purchased a 10 acre parcel, unaware its former owners were Richard's great-great grandparents, Robert and Matilda Whittle.) In 1880, Robert purchased an additional
160 acres, part of which now includes the Whispering Pines subdivision.

In April 1876 the first mail and express route via Topsy Grade was established. Whittle carried mail and express on the new route from Yreka to Linkville.

On September 22, 1876 a post office was established at Whittles Ferry. Robert Marple (Whittle's nephew) was the first postmaster.

Apparently, a telegraph line came through the area. The January 4, 1878 edition of the San Francisco *Alta* mentions that Bob Whittle repaired the telegraph line.

By 1878 Whittle had sold the ferry to William Roberts. Whittle then constructed a wooden bridge across the Klamath River where the current Keno bridge stands.

In April 1881 he sold the bridge to Lake County for $275 for use as a public highway. (Klamath County was not created until October 1882. For further reading on the evolution of Klamath County, see *Klamath Echoes*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pg 1.)

Postal authorities objected to the name "Whittles Ferry". They favored one-word names. In January 1878 the post office was renamed Plevna. Plevna was renamed Keno in August 1887.

**EPILOGUE: 1883-1919**

Tuberculosis (consumption) was a deadly disease in the 1880's and Whittle had contracted the disease.

The September 6, 1883 edition of the *Yreka Union* newspaper carried this news:

"ROBERT WHITTLE - Messrs. Charles King, Frank Miner et al who recently returned from an extended trip through Southern Oregon inform us that they stopped at Bob Whittle's place on the night of the 29th of August, and he did not seem to be particularly sick, but the next morning he was dead. Whittle was widely known in this county having peddled fish here for a number of years. He has been suffering with consumption for several years of which disease he died on the 30th."

Also in same paper under Vital Statistics:
"Died at Whittle's Ferry, Klamath County, Oregon, August 30, 1883, of hemorrhage of the lung, Robert Whittle, age 56 years. Philadelphia papers please copy."

He was buried in the cemetery, which at that time was located on the south bank of the Klamath River below the present-day Keno cemetery. Later, when the Snowgoose family donated property for a cemetery further up the hill, some bodies were relocated. It is unknown if Whittle's body was relocated. There is no known grave site for Robert Whittle.

Matilda and two daughters survived Robert: Mrs. Caroline Picard residing at Beswick, Siskiyou County, California and Mrs. Mary Elvira Allen, residing at Plevna, Klamath County, Oregon. Robert A. Emmitt was Administrator of Probate, filed with the County Court for Klamath County on September 19, 1883 by Geo. T. Baldwin, Deputy Clerk.

Inventory of Robert Whittle, November 5, 1883:

Real Estate - Lots 4, 5, 6 of Sec. 6, T40S, R8E, 98 40/100 acres, appraised at $1,080.00; L4, Sec 31, T39S, R8E, appraised at $400.00; West 1/2 of NW 1/4 & W 1/2 of SW 1/4, Sec 6, T40S, R8E, appraised at $320.00.

Personal Estate - 3 head of cattle, $75; 13 head of horses, $455; 1 wagon, $30; 1 wagon $20; 1 sleigh, $30; 1 set harness, $5; 1,000 feet of lumber, $15; 9 tons hay, $100. Total of Estate: $2,530.00

Matilda sold the real property to Josiah Doten in 1885 for $2,000 and the area became known as the town of Doten. (Doten later sold a portion of the Whittle estate to Charles Snowgoose about 1891. Granddaughter, Cora Snowgoose Morrow still resides on the property.)

We next read of Matilda in 1907 when she had fallen on hard times. The March 21, 1907 Klamath Falls Express contained the article:

"Matilda Must Move" -- "The council has decided that Princess Matilda, who resides in the street on Klamath Avenue near Sixth Street, must move and she has been given notice to this effect. The Princess has her little abode on this
identical spot for many years and has become strongly attached to the old home. She has heretofore expressed a willingness to move provided she has some place to move to, but has also declared in emphatic terms that she would die rather than leave her home. Princess Matilda is a full blood Klamath and royal Indian blood courses through her veins. Her brother was chief of the Link River Band of Klamaths and she has always considered herself somewhat superior to the people of her tribe. During the Modoc War she was employed as a messenger in the peace negotiations and did excellent service. What to do with the old Indian woman is a question that must be settled soon. She is a nuisance where she is and must move. An effort will be made to have her taken to the reservation and if this proves unsuccessful perhaps she may be allowed to remove her little home to some vacant lot in the outskirts of the city."

By 1912 Matilda lived on Roosevelt Street. The Elliotts, Dortha, Nelle and Robert recall Matilda. Matilda "would climb the hill and when she got to the Elliott house at 523 Lincoln Street, she would stop to rest and get a drink of water, which their mother always had ready for her. Bob and Jack would whistle just to make her mad at them. She would always say, 'Quit your whistling, you'll bring the wind'. Dortha remembered the swampy area near the city water tank at the top of the hill where the wild grass grew. Matilda Whittle would bring a scythe and cut the grass to feed her pinto horse. 'We'd go over and talk to her while she was cutting the grass and she would tell us stories about different things.... She talked often about Captain Oliver Applegate'." Klamath County Historical Society, Trumpeter, No. 38, 1994.

January 9, 1919 Matilda died at her home in Klamath Falls of dropsy of the stomach. She was survived by daughter, Elvira (Caroline died in 1907) and nine grandchildren.

She is buried in the Wilson Cemetery. Her headstone erroneously lists her date of birth as 1849.
RESOURCES

Bancroft, Hubert, *The History of Oregon*, Vol. II, p. 599, 1888. (Bancroft was not charitable to Whittle or Riddle, and perhaps libelous as well, when he wrote: "Whittle and Riddle belonged to that class of white men known on the frontier as 'squawmen'. They were not necessarily bad or vicious, but in all disturbances of the kind in which the people were then plunged were an element of mischief to both sides. Having Indian wives, they were forced to keep on terms of friendship with the Indians whatever their character, and owing allegiance to their own laws of the state and their own race, they had at least to pretend to be obedient to them. It is easy to see their encouragement of the Modocs, direct or indirect, had a great deal to do with bringing on and lengthening the war.")


------, No. 11, pp. 11, 14, 18, 26, 32-33, 38, 90, 93, 1973.

------, No. 12, p. 22, 1974.


Riddle, Jeff C., *The Indian History of the Modoc War*, Union Press, San Jose, California, 1914.


The author also wishes to thank Andrew Ortis, Klamath Falls, Oregon, for the generous contribution of his research materials on his ancestors, Robert and Matilda Whittle, without which this issue of the *Trumpeter* would have been much more difficult.
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1996 CALENDAR OF MEETINGS
Meetings are held the 4th Thursday of the month -- with some exceptions! BE SURE TO MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

JANUARY 25  2:00 pm
FEBRUARY 22  2:00 pm
MARCH 28  2:00 pm
APRIL 25  7:30 pm
MAY 23  7:30 pm
SEPTEMBER 26  7:30 pm
OCTOBER 24  7:30 pm

** The Exceptions **

* Sunday, JUNE 23 - Annual Tour - see Upcoming Events, next column.

* Thursday, JULY 25 - Summer Potluck - time & place to be announced.

* Sunday, NOVEMBER 24 - 12:30-4:00 pm - Fall Potluck & election of officers.

* NO MEETINGS IN AUGUST OR DECEMBER.  ***

"There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it"
---Edith Newbold Jones-Wharton

DUES
$5.00 PER PERSON, PER YEAR. Just a reminder that we need your dues paid, if you haven't already done so. Send your check to Klamath County Historical Society, 1451 Main St., Klamath Falls, OR 97601.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Mark your calendar for these great events and help your museum.

April 27 & 28 - Friends of the Museum Antique & Collectibles Sale.

May 10 - Friends of the Museum Bi-Annual Dinner. 6 p.m., $20 per person, meal served by Molatore's.

June 15 - Ethnic Faire, sponsored by the Museum Board.

June 23 - Historical Society tour of Clear Lake area; Applegate Trail; Captain Jack's area of surrender. Everyone welcome.

July 4 - Applegate Trail marker dedication on Highway 97S, near State Line Road.

The Historical Society would like to welcome new members, William & Marilyn Pile, Marge Rambo & Dorothy Fleming.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the Endowment Fund in honor of Orton Buck and Mae & Red Smith. Contributions totaled $535.