MOWATOC, THE LAVA BEDS & CAPTAIN JACK

Editor’s Note: The year 2000 marks the 75th Anniversary of the establishment of the Lava Beds National Monument. This issue of the Trumpeter will present a summary of the events leading up to and culminating in the tragedy that took place there in the winter and spring of 1872-73.

Many of the events associated with the Modoc War abound in controversy and the truth will never be known. For example, Ben Wright set out to kill Indians. Or did he? The Modocs insisted Wright served them strychnine-laced beef at the “peace parley” in 1852 and shot those in attendance when he realized the poison was ineffective. This incident caused the Modocs to suspect the motives of the government whenever peace negotiations were conducted and may have contributed to General Canby’s death at the peace tent April 11, 1873. Opposed to the Modocs belief was the Army’s assertion Wright was nowhere near the Modoc camp in 1852. Wright admitted he was there, but has a different story to tell. (The Modocs were about to attack him.) Another version has him trying to obtain the release of captive settlers and stolen goods.

At this late date, we will never know the truth. All we can do is to apply common sense and draw our own conclusions.
PRELUDE TO CONFLICT

The Modoc War was fought on the Oregon-California border in 1872-73. Unbelievably up to one thousand army troops combined with 100 volunteers were held at bay by only 53 Modoc warriors for a period of seven months. The Modocs fighting for the ancestral homeland administered 165 casualties to the army, while losing only five of their men; two who were killed when examining an unexploded cannonball. It was the most costly Indian war on record. It was the only Indian war in which a ranking general of the Army, General Canby, was killed. The causes of the war were many. And in the next few pages we will explore some of the events leading to this tragedy.

The Modoc homeland was called Mowatoc by the Indians. It is the Tulelake-Lost River areas. This was the ancestral home for the Modocs. It had little timber, but made good grazing land for cattle and it soon became sought after by the settlers.

The Klamath Indian’s homeland was to the north in the areas of Klamath Marsh, upper Klamath Lake and Williamson River. In the 1870’s cattle ranching was an important activity and timber would become important only later, around 1900. The Modoc lost their homeland because their land was valuable at the time. The Klamath’s kept their homeland because in the 1870’s timber had little value and reservations were usually located on land with little value.

The neighbors of the Modoc’s were the Paiutes to the east, the Pit Rivers to the south, the Shastas to the west and the Klamaths to the north. The Klamaths and Modocs may have split off from each other in some distant past, as their language was similar, but they were hostile to each other at times, and had many conflicts in the past. This created an aura of distrust. Although one of Captain Jack’s friends was Link River Jack, a Klamath.

When the Applegate’s were scouting a trail, they unfortunately came through Modoc country and crossed the Lost River at the Stone Bridge. The Stone Bridge area was a long time Modoc camp site. (Editor’s Note: The Stone Bridge was located on Lost River at the current site of the Anderson-Rose Dam on Malone Road, a mile and a half southeast of Merrill. The ‘Bridge’ was a rock ledge which acted as a natural bridge. Water flowed under and over it to a depth of about 18 inches. The Bridge was wide enough to accommodate a wagon. By the time of the Modoc War, it was no longer in use because the depth of water had increased since Applegate had passed over it. (For further reading about the Stone Bridge
The first settlers to use the Applegate Trail drove their wagons and stock right through the Modoc’s front yard. At first the Modocs were frightened by the appearance of the settlers with their white-topped wagons. They soon learned the settlers would hand out food, such as bread and sugar. When the Applegate’s came through in 1846, there were approximately 1,000 Modoc Indians in the area. Within a short period of time, the settlers had introduced small pox to the Indians. By the time of the Modoc War, the tribe had decreased to approximately 400 individuals; 175 who were aligned with Captain Jack.

When the settlers would come through, they would bring with them many head of cattle. They would hunt and they would cross over Indian pios digging fields, creating conflict. From time to time, cattle were stolen by the Indians, creating opportunities for conflict. The very first wagon to come through in 1846 brought with them large numbers of cattle. The Indians stole some; they killed some. The settlers trying to recover their cattle destroyed a village along the shores of Tule Lake. In retaliation a settler who was straggling behind was killed.

In 1851, the Pit River Indians, south of the Tule Lake area, attacked an immigrant train on the Lassen Trail north of Alturas. Some survivors made it to Yreka, where a posse of 65 men under Jim Crosby was organized. Crosby made it to the site and the dead were buried. They continued north and soon found their way into the Tule Lake area, then called Rhett Lake. Along the way they met friendly Modocs. They camped one night, alongside the Modocs. What they didn’t know was the Pit Rivers responsible for the wagon train attack, had followed them. At dawn the attack began. Several of the posse members were struck by arrows, but only one was seriously wounded. The Pit River Indians soon abandoned the attack. Thinking the Modocs were responsible, Crosby and his men began killing every Indian they saw. Many of the Indians he killed were families that had come up to Crosby and his men. Making hand signs of peace, they were met with gunfire. Men, women and children were all killed. The Indians were scalped. In a few days, Crosby and his men made his way back to Yreka, with Indian scalps hanging from their saddles. The citizens of Yreka held a dance in his honor the next night. This act by the whites was the start of hostilities between the Modocs and the settlers that would last the next twenty years. The word quickly spread around Indian country the settlers were no long friendly.
Several months later in October 1851, a wagon train of settlers was making its way through Modoc country. Unaware of Crosby's actions, they headed for the Stone Bridge and the Modocs encamped there. They camped for the night in a small canyon a short distance outside of what is today Malin, Oregon. They saw a few Indian tracks as they gathered wood for the evening meal. They soon retired for the night. About one mile northeast of their location the Modocs under Chief Modocus, Captain Jack's father, were waiting. At first light the attack began. Only a few immigrants were up and the arrows quickly felled these immigrants. In very short order about half of the immigrants were killed.

The immigrants soon came to order and rallied. The Indians retreated and held a council. They sent runners north and south to bring help. By dusk a large body of Modocs had gathered. About midnight the attack began again. The arrows found their mark. That night, however, a few settlers slipped out. At day break, the Indians entered the camp. The only living thing they found was a ten to twelve year old girl, who was taken captive, but killed about three miles from the site.

The wagons were burned and anything of value to the Indians taken. Survivors made it to Yreka. A posse was quickly organized under Al Woodruff. Several days later they arrived at the site and buried the dead. Continuing on, they found the body of the little girl and buried her. Thirty-six settlers died in that attack.

The site of the attack quickly earned the name Bloody Point, as it is still called today. Although Woodruff and his men saw several Modoc encampments, he continued on to Yreka without killing anyone. Woodruff was obviously cut from different cloth than Crosby.

The Modocs responsible for the attacks headed for the hills, expecting retaliation. Those not involved remained at their usual campsites. The settlers kept coming.

Then in 1852, Ben Wright appeared on the scene. Ben Wright fancied himself an Indian fighter. He came from the settlement of Rogue River to Yreka and organized an 100-man vigilante group whose purpose was to rid the area of Indians. They rode to the Klamath Country and killed Klamath Indians. They rode to Sprague River and killed Snake Indians. They rode to Paiute country, near Goose Lake and killed Paiutes.

In October 1852, they were in Modoc country. By this time word had spread throughout Indian country of Wright's activities and Indians were getting scarce. Wright came across an
Indian who spoke some English. Wright concocted a plan. He would bring the Indians to him. He told this English-speaking Indian that he was a representative of the Great White Father in Washington sent to make peace with the Indians. Wright told this Indian to get together as many Indians as he could and meet him in three days at the Stone Bridge and they would have a big feast and talk peace.

The Indian did as he was told. Wright used this time to obtain a beef and bottle of strychnine. His plan was simple. He would poison the Indians. When Wright returned in five days, 50 Indians who wanted peace were present, including Modocus and Schonchin John. Schonchin John would later become Captain Jack’s sub-chief. Wright placed the Indians between his camp and the river on a bend. They were hemmed in. That evening the poisoned beef was cooked and many ate the beef. But something went wrong. Either the heat made the poison less potent or the druggist supplied an adulterated substance. Later, Wright would complain the Yreka druggist that had sold him the poison had taken advantage of him by selling him an adulterated sample.

Only a few Indians got sick. Anticipating the Indians would figure out what happened, at around 4 a.m. Wright sent half of his men behind the Indian camp and kept half at his camp. At first light, Wright walked toward the Indian camp and shot the first Indian he saw. This was a signal for the 100-man vigilante group to start firing. It had rained that night and the Indian’s bows were unstrung. They could not retaliate. Only five Indians escaped. Schonchin John was one of the five. Captain Jack’s father was one of the victims. The dead were scalped and mutilated. With scalps and other body parts hanging from their saddles, Wright and his crew returned to Yreka. The citizens called him the “great savage civilizer”. The citizens gave him a hero’s welcome and a party that lasted two days.

After the massacre, Captain Jack and his remaining family went to the Stone Bridge to cremate the dead. The Modocs scattered and their hatred of the whites became intense.

Captain Jack is less that twenty years old at the time. He replaced his father as leader. Incredibly, Ben Wright is appointed Indian agent for a tribe of Rogue River Indians. He was killed later, by one of the tribal members. He died as he lived.

The Modocs dodged the whites for several years. About 1858 Captain Jack and some of his men show up in Yreka seeking peace. Jack connects with Judge Rosborough and several
other prominent Yrekans: John Fairchild, attorney Elijah Steele and Prez Dorris. These men convince Captain Jack that if he is peaceful there will be no problem with the whites. It is during this time that Captain Jack obtained his name. His Indian name was Kientpoos. Elijah Steele called him Captain Jack because he resembled a Yreka-area miner with the name Captain Jack. The name stuck. Jack was a happy man when he returned from Yreka. He returned to his camp at the Stone Bridge to take up trapping.

Most immigrants passing through this land were bound for the Willamette Valley, but by the mid 1860’s this area was filling up with settlers and cattle ranches.

The Tule Lake area was good pasture. In 1864 the government was pressed by the settlers to take action. A treaty committee was organized. There were negotiations with the Indians. The goal was to get the Indians to cede their rights to land in exchange for the promise of goods and food and an established reservation.

Negotiation culminated in the signing of the Treaty of 1864 at Council Grove on Klamath Lake, whereby various bands of Klamath, Modoc and Snake Indian ceded their rights to 20 million acres in exchange for a one million acre reservation and food. Jack was a reluctant signer. Most of the land ceded was traditional Modoc lands, not Klamath land. It was unlikely Jack fully understood the terms of the treaty, as he promptly returned to the Stone Bridge area, which was ceded in the treaty. For the next five years, Captain Jack and the Modocs lived at the bridge site. Settlers started to complain. The Indians were demanding food and stealing cattle. The settlers wanted the Modocs returned to the reservation and they demanded action. In November 1869 A. B. Meacham was appointed to return the Modocs to the reservation. Meacham met with the Modocs and apparently without too much difficulty was able to get Jack and his band to leave the bridge area and relocate to Modoc Point. The day after the meeting with Meacham, the Modocs were encamped at Modoc Point. Captain Jack promptly put his men to work splitting rails for sale to the settlers. By December 1869, the Modocs had split 900 rails. It had snowed, so they quit work for a couple days. When they returned, they saw several Klamath Indians loading up the rails on to wagons. Captain Jack approached the Klamaths. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“These are our rails” the Klamaths replied. “This is our land. These are our trees. Get out of here.”
Captain Jack immediately went to see Indian agent O.C. Knapp. Knapp was a military man appointed by Governor Grover whose anti-Indian feelings were widely known. Knapp was appointed probably because he felt the same way.

Knapp’s response to Captain Jack’s complaint was to “move, forget it”, he said. “Move upriver about five miles.” So Jack and his Modocs did just that.

There was no further problem until May 1870 when the Modocs started cutting rails again. They had cut about 300 rails when the same Klamaths stole the rails. Jack again went to Knapp. Knapp’s reply was curt. “Quit bothering me. You can’t get along with anyone. If you don’t quit complaining we’ll move you to some place where no one will bother you. Now get out of here!”

Jack thought Knapp was afraid of the Klamaths. The next day Jack and his Modocs were back at Stone Bridge.

They remained at the Stone Bridge in an uneasy peace until November 29, 1872. In October 1872, John Fairchild, a rancher in the area and on friendly terms with the Modocs contacted Jack at the camp to tell Jack in about one month the soldiers would come to move them back to the reservation. He urged Jack to go peacefully. Being a local rancher, Fairchild had great self-interest in getting the Modocs cleared off the land peacefully. Fairchild, too, would lose an occasional beef to the Modocs.

On November 27, Toby Riddle, later known as Winema, who was Captain Jack’s cousin and married to a white man, Frank Riddle, visited Jack to tell him the soldiers would be there the next day. She urged him to join her people at the Yamix Station on the reservation.

On November 27, the Secretary of War sent a message to the commander of Fort Klamath, Major John Green, to return the Modocs to the reservation “peacefully, if you can, forcefully if you must”.

After Toby left camp, the Indians decided to feel out the settlers, as they had heard rumors the settlers would assist the army in their removal. A group of Modocs went to visit the settlers on the north and east shore of Tule Lake to urge them not to help the Army and to help the Indians remain at the Bridge. The settlers agreed not to assist the Army. The Indians returned to camp satisfied their mission was successful.
The Indians talked in counsel. They would not fight unless they were forced to fight. Indians in the camp said it was a restless night. The dogs barked all night.

There were two villages in the area. The north and south bank villages. Captain Jack’s camp was on the south bank of Lost River. Curley Headed Doctor’s lodge and about fifteen other families were on the north bank, directly across from Jack’s camp.

It was the intention of the Army to send a force large enough that the Indians dare not resist. Something went wrong and the message Major Jackson received was to go immediately to Captain Jack’s camp and return him to the reservation. Major Jackson had only 36 men available to him. They left Linkville immediately upon receipt of the message.

Major Jackson and his men rode up to Captain Jack’s camp. Seventeen dismounted and walked a few steps. They stopped about thirty feet from the lodge. The remaining soldiers remain mounted and held the reins of the horses. Some sources claim Jack stepped out to meet the soldiers. Jack was armed as were his men. It was reported Captain Jack’s men had only thirteen muzzle-loading rifles available to them. Major Jackson began. He wanted Jack to go peacefully back to the reservation. There was a murmuring among the older Indians, “Remember Ben Wright”. They believed a trap was about to be set.

There was some more talk. Jack was agitated. He didn’t want to go back to the reservation. “Lay down your weapons”, Major Jackson ordered and he pointed to the ground.

There were a few tense minutes, then one by one, the Indians started laying down their rifles. It was a hopeful sign that they would return to the reservation peacefully. But then, Scarface Charley walked up to lay his rifle down. He set it on the pile. Major Jackson spied Charley’s sidearm. “That too,” he said.

Charley protested, “I’ll need it. It’s just a light pistol.”

Major Jackson ordered Lieutenant Boutelle to get the pistol from Scarface. [Scarface was so named because he had fallen off a wagon when he was young.]

Boutelle confronted Scarface: “Give it here, now!”

Scarface drew the pistol. “You son-of-a-bitch,” said the Lieutenant as he drew his pistol. The sound of the pistols discharging was said to make only one report. Incredibly, neither
ENDOWMENT FUND GROWTH

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ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS

In Memory of

CHARLES STOKES HOUSTON

Mae Smith

MYRTLE MASON

Mr. & Mrs. John Fortune
Daniel & Thelma Johnson

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Also a big Thank You to all the volunteers who contributed at the Christmas party!!!
Klamath County Historical Society

This issue of the Trumpeter was written in March 1993 by Irene Currin, a longtime member of the Historical Society. Your editor welcomes reader submissions. If you have any memories you would like to share, please drop off or mail to Klamath County Museum, 1451 Main St., Klamath Falls, OR 97601.

Membership Information

Individual Member $5.00
Supporting Member $25.00
Life Member $100.00

Send your dues to Klamath County Museum, 1451 Main Street, Klamath Falls, OR 97601.

The Rummage Sale will be held sometime in April. Start getting your items together now. We will need volunteers, so please lend a hand!!

The museum is looking for a toy train set to display. If you have one hiding in your basement, consider donating it.

Sometimes there is some confusion whether you have paid for the upcoming year. If you look on your mailing label you may see an entry above your name. A date entered indicates you are paid through that year.

Initials indicate you are receiving a complimentary issue or are a Life Member. If there is no entry, you either haven't paid for awhile or the Editor is sending you a complimentary issue, hoping you will become a member.

Meetings are held the 4th Thursday of the month — with some exceptions. See schedule below. We meet at the Klamath County Museum meeting room, 1451 Main St., Klamath Falls, Spring Street entrance.

Susan Rambo, Editor

1999 Meetings
January 28 2 pm
February 25 2 pm
March 25 2 pm
April 22 7:30 pm
May 27 7:30 pm
June - Annual Tour
July - Summer Potluck
August - No meeting
September 23 7:30 pm
October 28 7:30 pm
Nov - Annual Meeting
December - No meeting

Wanted: A copy of Fifty Years on the Klamath by John Boyle. Call 882-1440.