

MODOC: An American Indian Saga

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*[Note: the author is enrolled with the Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma
and is the great-granddaughter of Modoc War warrior,
Shkeitko, “Shacknasty Jim”]*

**From the 2010 Roundup! — an anthology released by
Western Writers of America and published by
La Frontera Publishing - Cheyenne, Wyoming**

The two men faced each other in the freezing November dawn.

Second Lt. Frazier Boutelle stood coatless in his blue U. S. military uniform. He had taken off his coat an hour before, knowing that he might need to have the free movement of his arms. He and thirty-nine other U. S. Army military men, including a doctor and four men handling the pack train, had ridden through the night from Ft. Klamath, today in the state of Oregon. They'd come fifty-six miles in penetrating sleet and ice. The numbed men found themselves frozen to their saddles at times.

The Modoc man standing in front of him had a jagged scar running across one cheek. It had given him the name of Scarfaced Charley. He and other Modocs had awakened to the amazing sight of soldiers in the midst of their Lost River village, today part of northern California.

Suddenly both men lifted their weapons and gunfire rang out at exactly the same time. Neither man on that windy, snow-swept ridge could have known the great significance of the first two shots of the Modoc War, discharged simultaneously in the conflict that became known as the Lost River Battle.

Those shots, fired November 29, 1872, did not kill a man, but they would result in huge suffering and anguish to settlers, Modocs, and U. S. Army soldiers throughout the first half of 1873. The shots also signaled the beginning of a period that would profoundly and irreparably affect the destiny of the Modoc people.

The Modoc War of 1872-73 stands as an amazing conflict in United States history:

- **It was the most costly Indian war in United States military history, in terms of both lives and money, considering the small number of Indians who battled.**

- **By the end of the six-month war, over 1,000 U. S. military troops were engaged in bringing 50 - 60 Modoc men, who had their families with them throughout the entire war, under control. Army troops outnumbered Modoc fighting men about 20 to 1.**

- **The Modoc War is the only Indian war in American history in which a full-ranking general, General E. R. S. Canby, was killed.***

***Custer was not a full-ranking general at the time of his death.**

Were it not for the George Armstrong Custer fight at the Little Big Horn against the Lakota and Cheyenne only three years after the Modoc War, the Modoc conflict would probably be remembered as the most significant Indian confrontation in America's western history.

The Modoc War involved only one relatively small group of American Indian people. However, it is a riveting example of what happened across the United States as non-Indian settlers, landowners, and military persevered in efforts to continue western expansion. The Modoc saga is one that belongs equally to California and Oregon. But the end of the war would see Oklahoma become a part of this poignant story.

In war it is tempting, but simplistic, to label the warring factions as “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “bad.” War spawns cruel acts but also brings humane actions on both sides. The complexity of any war asks that naïve, one-dimensional conclusions not be drawn. War itself is the true evil.

Roots of War

For many millenniums the Modocs had inhabited 5,000 square miles in northern California and southern Oregon. Their population fluctuated between 400 - 800 at any given time. They were water people and made much use of waterfowl and fish. They used tule reeds to make baskets, canoes, sandals, and coverings for their homes and used seeds from the wocus, a water plant, to grind into food. Their semi-nomadic patterns took

them to the right places at the right times for their hunting, fishing, and food-gathering activities. Then the last move of the year brought them back to the favored areas for building their winter homes, called *wickiups*.

Above all, the Modocs loved their land. It was, in every sense, their world. The environment sometimes could be adversarial, but Modocs knew ways to cope. They understood the land. It was that knowledge that made them powerful in combat.

The Modocs were never a united tribe, coming together only in emergencies like war. Rather, Modocs lived in bands surrounding Tule Lake and along Lost River and other tributaries near the lake. The bands were autonomous, with each band having its own leader and governmental base.

The first non-Indians came into Modoc territory somewhere in the middle of the 1800s. Small pox followed shortly after that. The Modocs, like most of the Indians in their area, suffered great casualties as they lacked immunity to the disease.

But Modocs were to remember an incident in late 1852 even more vividly. Ben Wright was the stuff from which legends are made. With his long, curly hair and swaggering style, he was a notorious Indian killer who often bragged of the number of noses, fingers, and scalps he had taken from fallen Indians. It was Ben Wright and his men who rode into a Modoc camp under a white flag of peace and killed over 30 men, women, and children. Wright's meaning of a white flag was to be engraved in the minds of Modocs.

The traditional life of the Modocs ended with the Treaty of 1864. Although the treaty was never officially ratified, in 1869 the Modocs were coerced onto Oregon's Klamath Reservation along with the Klamath and Yahooskin band of Snake Indians. When the Klamaths, who greatly outnumbered the Modocs, began to harass the Modocs at fishing and attempts to cut timber, they sought help from Indian agent Capt. O. C. Knapp, a Union Army veteran who was not particularly happy with his role of Indian agent.

It was at this time that one Modoc emerged who was destined to stand out in Modoc history above all others. His name was Keintpoos, translated as "Having-the-Waterbrash" (pyrosis or heartburn), probably referring to his stomach problems. But his Indian name was not the one people would remember. Keintpoos became known as Captain Jack.

Three times Captain Jack met with Capt. Knapp with no action resulting. Finally, on the last visit, Knapp swore at Captain Jack and accused him of being a chronic complainer. Jack spoke no English but through his interpreter he replied, "If the agent does not protect my people, we shall not live here. If the government refuses to protect my people, who shall I look to for protection?"

With those words, Captain Jack and more than 300 Modocs left the Klamath Reservation in April of 1870 and returned to the ancestral Lost River land. Eventually some 130 Modocs drifted back to the reservation, under the leadership of Old Schonchin.

Some of the Modocs spoke English, although the tribe as a whole still used the native tongue. They adopted clothing similar to the settlers around them. Dungarees, shirts, and work shoes had long replaced the skins and tule sandals of their ancestors. Most had their hair cropped short and had muzzle-loading rifles with powder horns. Only the very old Modocs carried bows and arrows.

Yreka, California, had flamed to life at the western boundary of Modoc traditional land when gold was discovered in the vicinity in 1851. Modocs often looked for work there as house servants. Ranchers and farmers in the area would use Modocs as ranch hands.

The Modoc language was difficult on the tongues of the non-Indians, so Modocs were re-named. Shkeitko, meaning "left-handed man," was given the name Shacknasty Jim. Some say it is because of his mother's untidy housekeeping. Slat-us-locks became Steamboat Frank. He was named in recognition of the deep, resounding voice of his foster mother (who later became his wife). Boston Charley was very fair and Black Jim, was very dark. History has recorded the colorful names of historically well-known Modocs like Curley Headed Doctor and Scarfaced Charley. But lesser known Modocs had names that make one wonder who dreamed them up: Greasy Boots, Big Duck, Old Longface, Skukum Horse, Humpy Joe, and Tee-hee Jack.

Modocs, except for those who followed Old Schonchin back to the Klamath Reservation, continued to live in their ancestral homelands for over two years after leaving the reservation, until that fateful November 29, 1872, morning when the first attempt was made to return the Modocs to the reservation by attacking Captain Jack's village on Lost River.

A bungling of military orders and a lack of clarity as to whether government officials or the military branch was really in charge brought too few men to the Lost River village. Some thirty-five fighting soldiers were not enough to bring the Modocs into submission, even with the element of surprise on the side of the military.

Captain Jack's village was burned to the ground. Modocs claimed an old woman was burned alive in her *wickiup*. The military claimed that did not happen. History has obliterated the truth, but there was no doubt that war had come. The Modocs fled into the surrounding sagebrush, headed for the nearby water of Tule Lake. There, with only the clothes they had escaped in, men, women, and children began the cold, miserable trip in canoes headed south across the lake. They were headed for the desolate lava beds on the other side of the lake, where they would take their stand against the military. In that land, known today as the Lava Beds National Monument, they knew they could use the land against their enemy.

During the chaos and fighting at Captain Jack's village, a group of civilian men, with no military orders and without the soldiers even knowing they were there, raided a Modoc village across the river from Captain Jack's people, killing women and children.

In revenge, a group of Modocs from that village rode out around the shores of Tule Lake and killed 14 settler men—only men, an unusual act in the war tactics of 1873. Normally there was no distinction made between men and women. Henry Miller, long time friend of the Modocs, had been out riding the Thursday afternoon before the fateful Lost River Battle. He had assured Modocs he encountered that he knew of no plans for soldiers to be in the area. Because of the military's neglect to warn settlers of an impending attack, he had no idea there was a problem. Out riding on the day of the attack, he saw a band of Indians and raised his hand in greeting. He was shot from his horse and went to his grave never knowing what hit him—or why.

A Killing Time

Historical writings on the Modoc War have not made much note of the role of women, either Modoc or settler, in this war, but some of the bravest and most poignant stories are those associated with women. The settler women whose homes were raided, and men in the family killed, left a page in history that is not forgotten.

William Brotherton and two of his sons were shot and killed while cutting wood. Joseph, Brotherton's fifteen year-old son, was with neighbor John Schroeder, who tried to escape the Modocs on his horse. He did not succeed, the Modocs shooting him from his horse.

In the confusion, Joseph ran for home. Sarah Brotherton, seeing her son fleeing the Modocs, rushed to meet him with a revolver in her hand. Her younger son called to her to come back, then opened the door and followed her. Turning to the boy, she ordered him back to the house, told him to grab his father's Henry rifle, elevate the sights to eight hundred yards, and blast away at the Modocs. This he did, with his younger sister wiping and handling the cartridges. Sarah grabbed her older son and raced back to the house. Barricading the door with freshly purchased sacks of flour, she pushed loopholes in the house walls, converting her home to a fortress. The family, with Sarah shouting orders, bombarded the Modocs with rifle fire, keeping them at bay. Finally the Modocs left, but it was not until the third day that help finally arrived at the Brotherton homestead, and the beleaguered family was rescued.

The reaction to the settler killings was one of shock and horror and it reverberated across the nation. Modocs from other bands were also affected by the killings. The Hot Creek band, who lived on the western boundary of Modoc land under the leadership of Shacknasty Jim, had lives very separate from those in Captain Jack's village. Seeing that war was coming, they made the decision to turn themselves in to military officials at Ft. Klamath, where many of the soldiers were based. They wanted nothing to do with Captain Jack's war. Rancher John Fairchild, who hired many of the Hot Creek Modocs, felt he was living on the Modocs ancestral land and even paid a small rent to the Hot Creeks. Fairchild agreed to escort this band of Modocs to Ft. Klamath.

But the Hot Creek band, numbering approximately fourteen men and thirty women and children, was intercepted on the way north to the fort by a group of inebriated settlers who threatened to murder any Hot Creek that tried to cross the river. Even Fairchild could not contain the frightened Hot Creeks, and they bolted in fear. They rode to the south, eventually joining Capt. Jack in the lava beds.

One can only wonder what would have happened if the Hot Creeks had not joined Captain Jack's fighting force, which only numbered thirty to forty men. Would there

even have been a Modoc War? Fate intervened and sent Captain Jack fourteen more men, enough to make him feel he could wage a war rather than offer surrender.

Preparing the Stronghold

The Modocs realized that war had come.

Their battlefield was in a major lava flow in what is today the Lava Beds National Monument in northern California. The field of harsh, jagged rock results from volcanic activity over the last half-million years.

The Modocs's natural fortress was known as Captain Jack's Stronghold. To the south of the Stronghold was no man's land—torturous black lava as far as the eye could see. The terrain was so uneven and rough that no one ventured into it. The Stronghold was bordered on the north by Tule Lake, which provided water to those inside the lava walls of the Modoc war camp. As the weather warmed, water was a major survival issue.

Captain Jack, with Schonchin John second in command, chose this rugged landscape because he knew that the land itself would be a wicked enemy of the army troops. The Modocs, in contrast, knew the lay of the land and how to use it. The lava flow was part of their forbears' tribal domain. They had used the ice caves for food storage and water. The warmer caves were temporary hunting lodges.

The addition of the Hot Creeks brought the number of fighting men with Captain Jack to between fifty and sixty. The Modoc army was a young one. Many of the fighters could be classified as boys. A number of the better-known warriors and leaders were in their late teens and early twenties. The fighting uniform was the clothing they had adopted from the miners and ranchers in the area. Despite some of the glorified descriptions and drawings of Modoc fighters, dungarees, boots, shirts, and bandanas were worn.

One extraordinary aspect of this war is often overlooked. Modoc women and children, numbering somewhere around 100, were with their men in the lava bed throughout the entire six-month war. When battles were fought, the women and children were there. There are records of women actually being armed and fighting.

Captain Jack's Stronghold was two miles long and 300 yards wide. Pit-like depressions and broken lava tubes forming caves served as dwellings for the Modoc warriors, women, and children. The Modocs had acquired a herd of 100 cattle. These

animals were driven in and maintained as sustenance for the Modocs. The Stronghold had deep chasms running through the fortress allowing the Modocs to move easily from one end to the other. Jack's men dug additional trenches to strengthen their position. Where the natural terrain did not provide protection, they constructed artificial barriers of stone about four feet in height with loopholes to shoot through. Lookouts posted throughout the stronghold could easily see movement to the east and west.

The Modocs knew their own battlefield intimately. In preparing for battle, they had placed piles of rocks at strategic spots. These markers had no significance for the military but had a deep importance to the Modocs as they slipped from one point of cover to another, using the rocks as guideposts. There were large mounds of rocks fortified and designed for a man or two to be stationed in each, giving the Modocs about a twenty-foot altitude advantage over the soldiers.

The Stronghold was described by Lt. Thomas Wright, a U. S. soldier who fought and eventually died in the Modoc War, in this way: "The match for the Modoc Stronghold has not been built and never will be...It is the most impregnable fortress in the world."

The unique geology of the lava bed and the Modocs' understanding of how to survive in and use that terrain were the foremost reasons the Modocs were so successful. Bleak and forbidding, the jagged, sharp lava rocks became the allies of the Modocs, who used the land against their enemy in the truest sense of guerrilla warfare.

Curley Headed Doctor, spiritual leader and shaman to the Modocs, played a major role in the war, for it was his teachings that convinced the Modocs they were invincible. The shaman professed that no Modoc would fall in battle if they were to follow his beliefs.

Forward, March!

The battle to take the Stronghold and force the surrender of the Modocs took place on January 17, 1873. It pitted approximately 300 regular U. S. military men, volunteers, and Indian scouts against the small band of 50 or so Modocs.

Lt. Col. Frank Wheaton was the commander of this battle. The military strategy for the upcoming confrontation was "gradual compression" or squeeze them out. Troops would move in and compress from both the east and west. To the north was Tule Lake

and to the south was the inhospitable no man's land. The day before the battle Wheaton wrote Gen. E. R. S. Canby, commander of the department of the Columbia, "I don't understand how the Modocs can think of attempting any serious resistance, though of course we are prepared for their fight or flight."

The day of the battle dawned cold, dismal, and foggy. Troops were readied, and the order was given to advance. Soldiers soon discovered that to obey this command was not the same task as it had been in other wars. Skirmish lines—a row of men marching forward in unison— were quickly found to be virtually impossible.

Not only were there rocks to be skirted, but also a seemingly level stretch of land would suddenly break into a yawning chasm. Fog had settled in and overhung the lava bed like a quiet sea. It was not only difficult to know where the Modocs were, but determining the positions of their own units became a problem. In the confusion, the strategically placed Modocs were able to fire their rifles without revealing their positions. At one point Wheaton noted, "There was nothing to fire at but a puff of smoke issued from cracks in the rock."

One volunteer officer told of a very young soldier who had lost his way and ended up in the volunteer army ranks. The boy soldier was totally terrorized by the fighting. When the man next to him was shot and blood spurted out, the young man staggered back, retched violently, and then deliberately pointed his own carbine at his foot and pulled the trigger. He was through with soldiering for that day.

Howitzers, cannons that fired projectiles in a high curved trajectory, had been shipped to the lava bed specifically for this battle. They proved of no value when the enemy's position was hidden from view as it was in this battle. No one could tell where the rounds were landing. Afraid of hitting their own troops, leaders ordered the guns silenced. In Lt. William Boyle's words, soldiers were afraid they "would do more harm to our troops than to the enemy." It was back to rifles.

Maj. Green gave an insight into what the military faced:

It was impossible to make the proposed charge, the nature of the rocky ground preventing men moving faster than at the slowest pace, and sometimes having to crawl on their hands and feet. It is utterly impossible to give a description of the place occupied by the enemy as their stronghold.

At one point, Green became infuriated at his own men who when given the command to move forward, did nothing. In great frustration and disregarding the heavy fire, he leaped up in plain view of both soldiers and Indians and began a profane tirade on the character and ancestry of his men.

The Modoc were thrown off guard and absolutely astonished at this figure in blue jumping from rock to rock. Green snatched off his military glove and as he danced among the rocks, he pounded the glove into his other hand, punctuating his tongue-lashing with blows of his hand. For years to follow, the Modocs spoke of the magical properties of John Green's glove that protected him during the Modoc War.

After ten hours of battle, the U. S Army returned to its base camp, bruised, completely demoralized, and having suffered twenty-five wounded and twelve killed. The soldiers' clothing was in shreds from crawling among the rocks and their shoes were worn off their feet. Because of this defeat, Wheaton was relieved of his command, although many protested that move, and was replaced by Col. Alvan Gillem.

Before the battle had begun, Curley Headed Doctor had placed a tule rope dyed red around the perimeters of the Stronghold. He told the Modocs that not a soldier could cross that rope and not a Modoc would die.

He was right, and the Modocs were convinced they were invincible.

The Good Friday That Wasn't So Good

During the next three months, no major battle took place. The Modocs lived inside the Stronghold with families living in lava caves and getting water from Tule Lake. A peace commission was officially established shortly after the battle for the Stronghold. After the terrible defeat of the army, words now seemed to be a better route than weapons.

Good Friday, April 11, 1873, was the date set for the meeting of four U. S. peace commissioners and the Modocs. Gen. Canby headed the commission. Canby was respected by Indian groups with whom he had worked, and he was willing to work with the Modocs to find a solution. He was entirely confident that the results of the peace conference would be positive and end animosity.

Alfred Meacham, the former Oregon superintendent of Indian affairs, had been with the commission since its organization and, like Canby, he had worked successfully

with Indian groups. But unlike Canby, he had great foreboding about the conference. Toby Riddle, a Modoc woman, and her non-Indian husband Frank, were to serve as interpreters at the conference, and Toby had frantically warned Meacham that the Modocs were planning an attack at the conference. She and Meacham had become great friends when years before he had issued an edict that no white man could live with an Indian woman without marriage. As a result, Toby and Frank had married.

The night before the conference, the Modocs had met to discuss what was to be done. Modoc society operated on consensus. All decisions, both civil and war-related, were made by vote of the people. Captain Jack had stood in front of his cave with the Modocs gathered around him and made a plea for peace. But a Modoc jumped up beside him, placed a woman's basket hat on his head and a shawl around his shoulders. "You are a fish-hearted woman," the Modoc said.

When the final consensus was reached, the feeling was that by eliminating the military leaders, the Modocs had a better chance for success. Any misgivings the Modocs had about killing the commissioners were swept away by memories of the Ben Wright massacre. The ghosts of Wright and his Modoc victims had found their way to the windswept, desolate site of the Good Friday peace conference.

The four commissioners— Canby; Meacham; Rev. Eleazar Thomas, a Methodist minister from Petaluma, California; and Indian Agent Leroy Dyar—came under fire at exactly noon. Captain Jack raised his gun from a distance of five feet, pointed it at Canby's head, and fired. Rev. Thomas was shot in the chest by Boston Charley. "Don't shoot again, Boston. I shall die anyway," Thomas stammered as he rose to his feet. He, like Canby, was not to survive.

Both Meacham and Dyar had also come armed to the peace conference and Dyar made a quick retreat, threatening Modocs with a wave of his derringer. Meacham turned to run, tripped, and fell unconscious as a bullet creased his forehead. Boston Charley began to scalp him, a bit difficult, as Meacham was mostly bald. Toby Riddle, seeing her friend in deep trouble, yelled out, "The soldiers are coming," causing Boston Charley to dart away from Meacham. When soldiers arrived a half-hour later, they found Toby sitting beside the wounded Meacham. They also found the bodies of Thomas and Canby where they had fallen. The Modocs had stripped Thomas and Canby naked.

Back to War

On April 14 the Stronghold was once again attacked. But this time it was different. There were 650 men and they were primed for battle. Col. Gillem was in command but was extremely unpopular with his men, even to the point of having his orders disobeyed at times. The three-day battle ended on January 17 and the soldiers entered the Stronghold. Much to their amazement, only a few older, infirm Modocs were there. During the night, the Modocs had vacated the Stronghold through a route running south through the lava beds. Scouts recalled how they had thought they had heard children crying during the night but had not investigated.

Where were the Modocs? That thought plagued Gillem, and on April 26 he sent out a patrol of approximately sixty-five military men. At around noon, the men took lunch, pulling off their shoes, and relaxing. They had no sooner put their shoes back on and started forward when the Modocs, under the command of Scarfaced Charley, attacked. It was short and it was brutal. Two-thirds of the patrol was wiped out, including the patrol commanders Capt.. Evan Thomas and Lt. Thomas Wright.

Gillem delayed sending out a rescue patrol and by the time he did, the weather had turned bitter with driving sleet and snow. “Never did men suffer as did the officers and soldiers on that night, hearing the wails of the dying and with the fearful spectacle of dead men packed on the backs of mules. The sufferings of that night’s march made many a young man old,” related Lt. Boyle. Many felt Gillem’s actions were inept and following the Thomas-Wright Battle, Wheaton was reinstated.

Following the battle, dissention within the Modoc bands, accompanied by lack of water and food, signaled the beginning of the end for the Modocs. Over a thousand soldiers were now in pursuit. On May 22, 1873, the Hot Creeks surrendered, and on June 1 Captain Jack surrendered saying, “Jack’s legs give out.”

Thus came to an end one of the most grueling and expensive Indian wars ever fought. Even leaving out the huge expense of paying soldiers, estimates are that it cost \$10,000 per Modoc—in 1873 money—to subdue these Indians in battle. If the cost were to be calculated in 2008 money, it would amount to \$289,170 per Modoc.

Captain Jack, Boston Charley, Schonchin John, and Black Jim were put on trial for the peace commission murders and hung on October 3, 1873. They were buried at Ft. Klamath, although their heads were shipped to the U. S. Army Museum for study. Shortly

thereafter, 150 Modoc men, women, and children were taken to Redding, California, and put on a train carrying them to Oklahoma Indian Territory.

Exhausted, hungry, and cold, on a bleak November day they arrived at their new home on the Quapaw Agency, near what today is Miami, Oklahoma. Having fought a battle that created international headlines in its time and that would spawn writings for over a century, history then turned its back on the Modocs. This tribe now started down an obscure road of little interest to the American press or anyone else.

They worked hard to adapt to their new life. As one Indian agent said, “The Modocs plow and sow and reap with the same resistant courage with which they fought.” They were devastated by tuberculosis—almost wiped out by an enemy more lethal than guns. The corrupt Quapaw Agency administration gave them sub-standard food. The Modocs did not receive adequate medical supplies and services. The Modoc population numbers dropped dramatically. For half a century the Modocs struggled to survive.

But survive they did. This was the tribe that wouldn’t die, and today their descendants speak proudly of the tenacious staying power that carried Modocs through years of war, unrest, and disease. As long as the heart and soul of a people have tolerance, tenacity, and boldness, they will never die.