

EARLY MODOC HISTORY.

From 1838 to 1852—How the White Pioneers Treated the Indians—The Story of Ben. Wright.

From Our Special Correspondent.

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It may be said, with considerable justness too, that the Modocs have had no recent occasion to complain of the whites. They have been fed on the reservation whenever they chose to reside there, and the Government has complied with its obligations, so far as the Indians would accept of such compliance. This generation of Modocs has dwelt near to white settlements, and had intimate dealings with the white race, so that Capt. Jack's band speak the English language much better than ordinary Indians. There is, however, a chapter of Indian history which goes back to the past; and as the Modoc leaders have referred to this in their talks with the Commissioners, and evidently justify their treachery because they claim to have revenged acts committed upon their fathers, it must be of interest to the public to know what were the facts of this early history.

In the earliest times known to us these Indians were troublesome and treacherous. All the tribes of Southern Oregon and Northern California were so until peaceable relations were established; and they were only established when the Indians had waged battle to their hearts' content, and had been thoroughly vanquished.

It is not easy at the present time to find authentic information as to when the Indian tribes of that region first knew the whites. The Catholic missionaries of California never extended their labors so far north. The Hudson's Bay Company did not extend their operations so far south, and the Russian Fur Company had forts along the coast, but did not penetrate the interior. Of course there was not much travel between California and the Columbia River until comparatively late times. The first I learn of is that a small company of whites made the overland journey north in 1838. This party reached Rogue River in safety, and drove their horses on an island where there was grass, so that they could be kept from roaming abroad, and possibly they had fears of being stolen by the natives. They camped here several days to rest, and were all taken sick with the ague. While in this condition two Indians visited them, with only friendly pretenses, to be sure, but the travelers argued to themselves that there was danger that these would report their condition, and bring their tribe upon them to murder them. They therefore deliberated, and concluded to kill these visitors; and the story told by one of the party is that they did kill them, and then pushed northward.

The revenge for this act was that the next year, in 1839, another party of emigrants from California, seventeen in number, were attacked by Indians in that same vicinity, and only four escaped. Two of these men are living here now. I believe these stories may be received as authentic, and they serve to show that the first impression made on the Indians of Rogue River Valley and all Southern Oregon was unfavorable. Occasionally, in early days, a hunter, trapper, or mountaineer may have made an expedition through that region, but those men were polite and cultivated peaceful relations; for they traded among the Indians and got supplies of them. The country remained undiscovered, almost, until in 1846, when a large emigration was crossing the plains, and the difficulties encountered in descending the Columbia River induced a large number to come in through Southern Oregon. I know a number who did so, and I learn that they came in directly through the Modoc country and were greatly molested by the Indians. One man, whom I see every day, has an arrow-head in his shoulder now, carried there twenty-seven years as a memento of the time when the Modocs stole all their animals and the men of his train were obliged to fight three days to recover them. The weapons of the whites were very superior to those of the Indians, for the latter had but the poorest of bows and arrows.

I myself went through from the Columbia River to California with an ox team in 1851, and the region I have referred to was then hostile. We went armed and kept constant guard. I remember having heard complaint made then by fair-minded persons that some reckless Oregonians had ruthlessly killed two Indians, and provoked by this means the massacre of unoffending travelers. It was a season when mining discoveries were made in Northern California and Southern Oregon. Yreka sprang up like a gourd in the night and became a city of tents. We could raise a company of men to kill Indians at the drop of a hat, and as the miners numbered thousands and were well armed, the Indians soon made peace, but did not keep it long at a time.

At the first discovery of gold in California, in 1848, many went overland from Oregon, and I have heard stories often told by them of the hostility of the Indians on the way. The Modocs did not live on the direct route, but rather to the east of it; the country they inhabited was east of Yreka. That place was within their range, but their homes and fisheries were on the Tule lakes, about eighty miles distant.

In 1852 another emigration came by the southern route, crossing from Humboldt through the lake country to the Rogue River Valley and Northern California. The Modocs considered themselves at war with the whites, and undertook to destroy the intruders. Old Schonchin, who now resides with the peaceable portion of the band on the reservation, was then the great war chief, and in a speech made to the Peace Commission, this Winter, he explained that he then thought he could kill all the whites, and undertook to do it. He fought until he had sixty warriors killed out of his band, and found the whites more numerous than ever; then we made peace and went on the reservation. He says they made legitimate war—according to Indian ideas; the whites had imposed upon them in the beginning, and they undertook to kill them off.

In the Fall of 1852 word came to Yreka that an emigrant-train had been destroyed in the Modoc country. The details were sickening, horrible. Volunteers were immediately called for, and one Ben. Wright, a frontiersman, possessed of all the recklessness and much of the chivalry that dwells upon the border, raised a company of thirty-two men, and went out to bury the dead, avenge the wrong, and pilot other emigrant-trains safely through the danger. Ben. Wright was a genuine Indian-killer, who spent much of his life among Indians, and whenever excuse offered was as ready to kill them as to eat. He was afterward assassinated—in 1858—by the Indians of the coast tribes, among whom he was then stationed as subagent.

There is quite an interest, now felt in the history of that expedition, because the Modocs claim that he was guilty of an act of treachery to them which excuses them for the death of Gen. Canby and Dr. Thomas. From the first Jack told the Commissioners: "We remember the treachery of Ben. Wright long ago, and will trust no one. More than twenty years ago, when I was a little boy, Ben. Wright murdered my father and forty-three others who went into his camp to make peace." The facts which I give below are taken from one of the company, whom I have known from that day to this, and are corroborated by the account of the affair Ben. Wright, himself, gave to Rev. J. L. Parrish, an early missionary, an old and well-known citizen of Oregon. They are also in accordance with the statements made by Old Schonchin, the peaceable Modoc chief, who is loyal and considered reliable. They differ somewhat from statements lately made by persons who were also in the company, but who claim they discovered that the Modocs intended treachery and took the initiative themselves.

Ben. Wright's company, while on the way to the Modocs' country, killed several Indians they found digging camas near their route; they then found the spot where the emigrant train was massacred, and buried thirty-two men, women, and children who had evidently been found sleeping in their beds and brutally mur-

dered. Their bodies had even been horribly mutilated after death. They learned afterward that two children saved alive from the massacre were murdered by being thrown over a precipice—very likely one of the precipices found in the lava beds.

The party did not succeed in finding the Indians, who easily concealed themselves in the tall trees that skirted the rivers and lakes. Wright finally used a Modoc woman—who was the pro tem. consort of one of his men—to open negotiations, and by feasting those who came into his camp they induced others to come. The Indians were camped near the volunteers, and between them and the lake. One day Wright made them a great feast, roasting an ox, but the Indians refused to partake, so Wright and his men opened fire on them, and only two escaped; forty-four Indians were killed, and the excuse now given is that the Modocs intended treachery. My informant knows nothing of that, but does know that it was generally talked in camp that the Indians were to be killed that day. Old Schonchin says they were informed by a Columbia River Indian, named Sill, who was with Wright that they were to be feasted on poisoned meat. Sill had become "impressed" by the charms of a Modoc woman, and notified her of the danger, and she informed the rest. My informant adds that this Indian received a hundred lashes, and was sent out of camp the next day, and they think he was pursued and killed by another Indian, who was also in the company. Old Schonchin says he and his followers took warning and went away before the massacre.

It is claimed by some of Wright's men, who now publish statements, that the Indians were saucy, said they would not surrender the goods and things stolen from emigrants, and said they were more numerous than Wright's men, and could not be made to do so. It may not be easy to justify Wright's conduct, but we can remember that these men's souls had lately been fearfully harrowed up at the scene of the massacre. They felt toward the Indians only implacable hostility, yet they have hearts that could grieve over that scene of murder, and could hazard much to avenge it. They did faithful duty toward other incoming trains, and that, too, without hope of reward, and on their return they counted up about sixty Modocs killed, while their own loss was only one man wounded.

I have gathered some interesting facts from Mr. A. B. Meacham, late Peace Commissioner, who has returned to his home in this city, and is rapidly recovering from his wounds. He believes that Capt. Jack and Scar-faced Charley were willing to accept peace conditions, and several times they partially did so; but the war element prevailed in the band, actuated by John Schonchin, who had treasured up the Ben Wright affair, and was one of the two Indians who escaped from it. He and others brought a pressure on Capt. Jack that made him carry out the final bloody programme. Jack, too, remembered that he had a father killed in Ben Wright's attack. If we conclude that these savages deliberately resolved to revenge what they deemed Wright's perfidy toward their race by enacting, so long after, their own appalling treachery, the act assumes dramatic proportions, and, viewed from an Indian standpoint, it can almost command respect. Capt. Jack said to Meacham: "I cannot ever consent to become a slave! God made me free and I have always been free, and never will consent to live on a reservation and have to ask for a paper pass to permit me to leave it." While we join in the cry: "Hunt down the Modocs!" let us not forget that these words were manly, and that, possibly, the Modoc chief had an uncivilized pride that can trace some kinship with that of the Anglo-Saxon. I have no hesitation to believe that the act of Ben. Wright's men bore fruit after many days, and dictated the revenge which was finally carried out. The Indians are a treacherous race, but, strange to say, they bitterly resent perfidy in the white man. It may be a compliment they delicately pay us when they deem our civilization capable of greater perfection.

In 1851 the steamer Sea Gull left the Columbia River with a company which intended to land at Port Orford, the southernmost point in Oregon, and commence a settlement. They were under the lead of J. M. Kirkpatrick, but what knowledge they had of the country I cannot say, probably nothing more than that it was entirely unoccupied by white men, and gold mines were near there. They were landed on a rock, or point, separated from the shore at high tide and only accessible by a narrow ledge at any other time. They took ashore a howitzer, and mounted it to command this approach. There were Indians in abundance there at that time, and when the tide favored, the savages waded off and climbed the rock, until it was pretty well besprinkled with painted warriors, armed with bows and arrows, but committing no unfriendly act. Somebody remarked that Indians were getting thick, and one of the argonauts answered: "I can soon settle that." He brought the howitzer to bear, and sent its shower of grape-shot into the midst of the unsophisticated archers. Then there was war. Arrows flew in showers, and my informant, who lives in sight of my window, got a wound; one white man was killed. I believe, but the Indians were butchered, for their weapons made no head against rifles and revolvers. The result was that the settlement had to be abandoned, for Indians gathered on the beach by hundreds, and the white men pursued their way northward, as they best could, by land. I have given you this sketch to show what Indian first impressions often are of the white man.

For many years the Modocs have been at peace, and it has been asserted that they have had no cause of complaint of the Government, and Jack says that when he signed the treaty he was told it did not give up his home on Lost River, and he further says that whisky was abundant when the treaty was signed and was used freely. That is rather a serious charge of itself, for the Government interdicts and severely punishes the sale of liquor to Indians, and there was a serious dereliction if the representative of the Government violated the law and used whisky to induce Indians to sign the treaty.

When we trace back this scrap of history to learn that these Indians have treasured in their hearts a resentment against the whites on account of this massacre of their fathers; when we read the speeches they made to the Commissioners, where they complain bitterly that their lands have been taken from them, and their women debauched, it may occur to the most prejudiced that there is an Indian side to this story of war and tragedy, and that the white man is not altogether blameless.

When this story shall be told in the future, with all the light history can throw upon it, it may appear to coming times heroic in these Modocs to die in their lava caves rather than to leave their homes for other lands, and the vengeance they are taking may rank among the most striking tragedies of history, for they are literally lightning to the death.