

Modoc: The Tribe That Wouldn't Die

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Foreword

Writing this book has been the emotional journey of my life—unlike any other path I have ever followed. I have Modoc blood and know that with the war, disease, and death that dogged the footsteps of Modocs, it is a miracle that I even exist. I *am* Modoc, of the tribe that wouldn't die.

My name, Chee-wa-wee, was given to me by Jennie Clinton who was the last survivor of the Modoc War. The name means “beginning of a basket.” The Modocs were great basket makers, and the start of the basket was the most important—if the beginning was symmetrical and tightly woven, the sides would grow as they should. The symbolism of this to a human life has always sparked my imagination.

A tiny wisp of life flickered into existence during the Modoc War of 1873 in a cave located in what today is the Lava Beds National Monument, California. Born to the Modoc warrior Shkeitko, known as Shacknasty Jim, and his wife Anna, this infant, my grandfather, struggled to survive that snowy, bloody winter of the war. Even after being hauled over miles of treacherous terrain under unbelievable battle circumstances, that delicate thread of life dug in and held on. He then faced the arduous exile to Oklahoma Indian Territory, the fate of the Modocs who remained at war's end.

In three short generations, my Modoc blood from Jim and Anna has mingled with blood rooted in Germany and Ireland. I served in the Lava Beds National Monument in 1989 and 1990 as a seasonal ranger-interpreter for the U. S. National Park Service. My job was to find meaning in the silent, sagebrush-dotted land and to interpret the history of the phenomenal Modoc War, opening people's minds—and hopefully their hearts—to the vast panorama of human social evolution.

The rigorous life of the early Modocs was by no means a way of life to me, only a history. But it was a history with so many mysteries and half-hidden truths that it begged me for clarification and understanding. Often at dusk as I sat in front of my cabin in the Lava Beds, I would

conjure up images in the fading light of the shadowy, ancient Indians who lived in the lake lands adjoining the Lava Beds. Sometimes, in the dimming light, I thought I could see distant silhouettes of Modocs and U. S. soldiers as they locked in brutal battle. During the time I lived in the Lava Beds, even in the silence of that land, I never felt I was alone.

It is important to me that readers know the total story of the Modoc people from ancestral times to the present. As I wrote, I marveled at the intricacy and antiquity of the early Modoc culture. Writing in the dead of night, I shed tears thinking of the fear my great-grandfather must have felt as he fought a battle that he couldn't win, all the while trying to care for his family, who were with him through the entire war. I was overcome with immense distress as I imagined the long, miserable train trip for my Modoc forebears, as prisoners of war, to Oklahoma Indian Territory.

But I also was deeply touched and saddened by the tragedy of settlers Louisa Boddy and Sarah Brotherton as their husbands and sons were shot dead by Modocs in a settler attack. They were brave and ingenious women. As I read the long lost letters of Second Lt. Harry De Witt Moore, written over 130 years ago in the bleakness of the lava fields, I wished I could have been there to comfort him.

I wrote this book through months and years of extensive research. But some of it came through the hand of fate reaching out and placing incredible material in my hands—sometimes through chance meetings, some through the miracle of unsolicited e-mails through my web site (www.cheewa.com). I am a professional keynote speaker, and as you will see as you read this book, the early Modocs honored oratory skills. They would have loved the fact that I have a way with words. This book has been written in hotels and planes all over the United States and Canada. My apologies to the passengers in the front half of the late-flight plane that I woke up when I found the buried story of my great-grandmother fighting troops herself.

This book was written on the fading fringes of time. Since finishing the writing of this book, Helen Crume Smith of the Klamath Tribes, 74 years of age, has passed on. So has Arnold Richardson, 102 years old and an honorary member of the Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma. These two

people, who never met, shared great memories and stories, a wonderful wit, and a love for the Modocs. I will miss them both.

My biggest message for those who choose to journey with me on this book odyssey, is that we need to understand and honor people as the human beings they are, regardless of race, gender, religion, and all the other walls and barriers of diversity that can be concocted.