

***MODOC: The Tribe That Wouldn't Die***

By Cheewa James

**Fictionalized Inserts**

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**—A Scramble for Safety—**

The fire and mayhem of the village were well behind Jennie Clinton. Her dugout canoe, now on Tule Lake, was tossed high in the air by the stiff and vicious wind. Waves broke over the canoe, swamping its inhabitants and threatening at times to dump the fleeing Modocs into the dark, turbulent water. Jennie was in her early teens in that winter of 1873, and in addition to the crippling fear that seized her, she had never in her life been so cold. The bitter sleet had practically paralyzed her. She shook so badly, her teeth felt like they would fall out. Her body was starting to quiver uncontrollably in response to the penetrating cold.

It had fallen to Jennie, and Jennie alone, to control the canoe with her paddles, and, when she was able, to throw every piece of her slender body and arms into trying to force the vessel forward. Her fingers were frozen in numbness and pain.

The teenager felt her aunt shuddering and shivering beside her. The two of them had managed to drag a badly wounded Black Jim into the canoe as bullets landed around them. They had frantically paddled down Lost River through the day and now moved across Tule Lake. The ten-foot cedar tree canoe was not made to handle three people, even with one as small as Jennie, and the craft listed dangerously. The

daylight had faded and darkness had brought an even more horrible cold.

The wind howled as if taunting the exhausted Modocs in the sorrow of their defeat. It was not so much a military defeat. In all the blood and confusion, no one seemed to know whether more soldiers or Modocs had fallen or even who had been killed or wounded. The defeat Jennie and the other Modocs felt on this awful night—with homes burned, possessions lost, family pets left behind—was the loss of security and the uncertainty of the future.

Jennie had been jarred from sleep this morning by gunfire. The wickiup in the winter camp had grown cold during the night as the fire died out, but Jennie had wrapped herself in her bearskin. When the noise had first started, Jennie had jumped to her feet only to be thrown to the floor by her mother.

“Hold the children down,” her mother had screamed, and then Jennie understood. They would all be safer from bullets if they were flat on the floor. The gunfire began to die down, and Jennie believed that it would all pass. Then she smelled smoke, and the truth became apparent to her. The soldiers were burning them out.

The smoke, fire, and screams had all mingled together as Jennie ran for the river. She didn't know where her mother, father, or brother and sisters had gone. She had managed to grab Auntie, who was too frail to move by herself.

Jennie stopped rowing for just a moment to relieve her burning arms. She reached down and pulled Auntie close, pressing her cold lips to Auntie's forehead. Her aunt had always been a dear part of Jennie's existence, and now Auntie's life rested in Jennie's hands, frozen as they

were. For all the panic Jennie was feeling, her aunt was far worse, emotionally and mentally ready to slip over the edge. Black Jim now moaned softly from the bottom of the canoe. He was somewhat sheltered from the wind and in his unconscious state was surely more comfortable than they, despite his wounds.

The flotilla of Modocs—Jennie could see the outline of canoes to both sides of her—were headed for the lava bed located thirteen miles across the lake. She could only wonder if her parents and siblings were somewhere in the canoes around her. Nothing could be heard above the whining of the wind. Silence and shock had settled over the Modocs

Jennie had traveled south previously to the lava bed. But that had been in another time. The lava land that had always before seemed so harsh and hostile was now a beckoning refuge. She knew its crevices and caves would offer shelter. The men had often talked of what they would do if war ever came to the Modocs. The barren wastelands across the lake would be where the Modocs would take their stand.

The land of burnt out fires, where hot volcanic lava had once flowed angrily across the landscape, now offered salvation to the Modoc people.

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—Reluctant Warrior—

Scarfaced Charley was not a born warrior, he decided, as he watched the bloody scene below him. Not twenty yards away, pinned down by crossfire from ridges on both sides, the young lieutenant, Thomas Wright, struggled to breathe as blood poured from a bullet wound in his groin. While on a rest stop only minutes before the Modoc attack on the government troops, Wright had commented to Evan

Thomas that “when no one sees any Indians, it is time to start looking for them.”

Wright never had the chance to look because the Modocs found him. As soon as the Modocs opened fire, he charged them. Scarfaced Charley had watched and been amazed at this white soldier’s bravery and selflessness in attempting to defend his men. Charley had also seen that some of the soldiers accompanying the young officer had turned and run away, true deserters, leaving him to fight as best he could.

Scarfaced Charley watched the badly wounded soldier and instinctively knew that it was only a matter of time before the soldier drew breath no more. The ground beneath Wright was soaked with blood.

The young soldier’s eyes were blue and full of tears. Blue eyes, white skin—brown eyes, brown skin. No great differences when surely the fallen officer had a mother who would grieve for him as much as Scarfaced Charley's mother would grieve if he died.

The dying officer raised himself onto his elbow and reached down to his waist where he struggled to pull something out of his pocket—a knife perhaps as a last defense? As Charley watched in amazement, the wounded man pulled out a gold pocket watch, exhausted with the effort. For a moment he held it to his cheek as his body convulsed in pain.

Painstakingly Wright began to dig in the sand with his fingers until he had hollowed out a small hole. With a final effort, he placed his father's watch in the depression and began to scratch the sand back into place. Blood was now pouring from his mouth, and the red flow mixed with the sand beneath his blue uniform. Then another bullet ripped into

his body, this time through his heart. His head sunk to the ground and he moved no more.

Charley covered his eyes and his stomach heaved. Senseless war, he thought. Charley was stretched out flat on his stomach, with his men to the left and right of him. That fateful day, less than five months ago, when soldiers had first ridden into his Lost River camp had finally come down to this: a blue-eyed boy who died alone in the sand, Modocs hunting people instead of game, and Modoc children crying in hunger as their mothers wearily followed in the footsteps of their men.

The day was still young, and Charley fought on. There were more charges to be made, more men to be killed. But his heart was not in this battle. Three hours it had been going on.

Years later he would remember this day, this moment, and not be able to recall whether his mind had guided his legs or his legs led him to his actions. A blinding light seemed to erupt in his brain. His legs coiled under him, and he shot upright.

He stood high on a rock, and his voice carried to the military men crouched below him and fighting for their lives, almost certain of their deaths. "All you fellows that ain't dead had better go home. We don't want to kill you all in one day."

Then he signaled his men to withdraw.

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