

MODOC: The Tribe That Wouldn't Die

By Cheewa James

Prelude to War

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.

The Modoc War of 1873 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.**

Were it not for the George Armstrong Custer fight at the Little Bighorn 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.

Archaeological research has documented that for many millenniums the Modocs had inhabited an area in northern California and southern Oregon. They were spread over about 5,000 square miles, roughly 100 miles, of territory. The Modocs' summer hunting ranged from Mount Shasta eastward and north to Goose Lake. Their permanent villages were in Lost River country, including Tule Lake, on what is today the central Oregon-California border. The Modocs were water people, much of their livelihood and culture stemming from their waterways.

Examining the findings from Night Fire Island, a recent-time archeological site in ancestral Modoc land, author Carrol Howe says, "It seems doubtful that any place will be found that was continuously occupied longer than the Modoc homeland."

Their population number fluctuated between 400–800 at any given time. Over those many centuries, the Modocs' culture, theology, and life had become perfectly tuned to their environment and the richness of the resources it provided them. Their 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 and storing their winter food caches. 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. Neighboring tribes regarded them as skilled fighters. They were masters at using the land to their advantage against the enemy. This trait was a major factor in their ability to battle the U. S. military so successfully.

Too often the Modocs have been stigmatized as warring savages, with little understanding given to other facets of their culture. Their tenacious staying power over thousands of years refutes this narrow stereotype. Investigation into the past reveals the Modocs as a solid, enduring people with a vast history. The aspects of their lives that dealt with social customs, family, theology, and art were well developed.

It is critical to realize that the Modocs were never a unified tribe but several autonomous bands. Each band had its own leadership and operated independently, except in war when they joined forces and selected a war chief. Modoc bands were not dictatorships. Both military and civil decisions were made by consensus of the entire group. This held true in the Modoc War, and the assembly of Modoc fighters met often to strategize.

The roots of the war began sometime in the mid-1800s. Increasing numbers of Anglo-European intruders, in their quest for new land, began to infiltrate and encroach on ancestral Modoc land. In the fall of 1847 the immigrants brought smallpox. It is unknown how many Modocs died, although there have been estimates as high as 130. Other Indian groups to the north suffered losses between 25 and 50 percent of their people. Some bands in the Columbia Valley of present day Oregon were eliminated completely.

The impact of the plague on the Modoc culture can only be imagined. The very young and the elderly are especially susceptible in an outbreak of this sort. The elders had always been the leaders and were the greatest reservoirs of knowledge and tradition. With the passing of the older people, there can be no doubt but that Modoc culture and leadership were adversely affected.

The bloody and tragic Modoc War could have been averted. The underlying cause of the war can be summed up in one four-letter word—land.

Land to the immigrants meant ownership. To the Modocs, land could not be owned any more than could air or water or clouds. It was inconceivable to the Modocs that they could be forced to leave their home and environment—relinquish their life-style. The case of the Modocs is similar to that of many other Indian tribes of mid-nineteenth century America. As more and more non-Indians poured westward, more and more land—the richer, more fertile Indian land—was being claimed by these immigrants.

The issue of how land was now to be parceled out and lived upon created great chasms between two cultures. There was even dissention among the immigrant settlers, landowners, and government as to who should get the land and how. When Yreka, California, gold fields opened in 1850, conflicts became more frequent between Indians and non-Indians. There was violence and bloodshed as the two cultures clashed.

But other things also generated and prolonged the war. Missed opportunities existed on both sides to solve problems and live cooperatively. Racial bias and stereotyping influenced decisions. Errors in judgment and miscalculations contributed. Military and government blunders such as

launching an attack with too few men and not notifying civilians of an imminent war were staggering.

The war resulted in great devastation, almost beyond comprehension, to the Modoc people. It placed them on the brink of cultural destruction. Even more severe were events after the war, but directly related to the war, that decimated their population, already very small.

There was the tremendous death and suffering of U. S. soldiers, cast into a nebulous, confusing war. Families of the wounded and slain dealt for years with the results of the Modoc War. Certainly among both Indian warriors and U. S. Army soldiers the feeling of “Why am I here?” was present. Settlers were caught in the middle of the battle. They suffered death and destruction while relying on the U. S. government and military to guide and protect them.

It is naïve to assume that even the separate sides—the Modocs and the U. S. Army—were cohesive. During the Modoc War there was dissention internally within both the Indian and military sides. On the side of the military, for example, dislike of a commanding officer by many of his own men caused disruption and even the disobeying of orders. The resulting low morale of the soldiers was a definite hindrance.

On the other hand, internal dissention at the close of the war caused the Modocs to split back into their separate bands. Bands thought differently about how to handle surrender and defeat. There were feelings of deception between separate Modoc bands and they turned on each other. They were no longer an integrated fighting unit.

Through centuries of existence, the Modoc were a people without a written language. At the time of the war, many Modocs did not speak fluent English. Much of what is known is the interpretation by others of what

Modocs did and said. Modocs were viewed by the U. S. government as “the other side,” a foe of U. S. military troops. Much of the history of the Modoc War is written from that perspective.

The Modoc War is often viewed and discussed without a comprehensive knowledge of the Modocs. Little has been written on the Modoc culture to enlighten people on this much talked about but little known tribe. To honestly interpret the war, the impact of Modoc culture on the war must be taken into account. My hope is that this book will provide readers with a greater understanding of the Modocs. The appendix of this book has a section, “The Ancestral Modocs,” which examines what we know of this ancient group of people,

Certain aspects of Modoc culture related to the war and the ultimate removal of the Modocs were reported in newspapers, military documents, and letters of that era: the Modocs’ surprise at being attacked in winter, as they traditionally did not fight in winter—the right of a Modoc deceased’s relative(s) to kill a shaman or healer who failed at his task—grieving mourners wailing for long lengths of time and covering their hair with tree pitch and ashes—the occasional circumstance of a man having more than one wife.

Most of what has been written on the Modoc War has not given sufficient emphasis to the fact that for the entire six months of the war, Modoc women and children lived and moved with the men of the tribe and experienced the battles of the Modoc War. I have explored what little we know of the Modoc women and tried to give them faces and voices.

There were also settler women pulled into the war in tragic circumstances. The first names of these women are not found in the bulk of writing on the Modoc War. Mrs. Brotherton, Mrs. Boddy, and Mrs. Schira

did not have first names. They do in my book. I am proud of the Modoc, settler, and military women who handled the war with strength and grace.

The Modoc War was riveting and highly emotional. The story of the Modocs as POWs in Oklahoma Indian Territory is equally compelling. These events are not dry history, and I want people—especially children and young people—to feel the significance and drama. Accordingly, I have inserted fictionalized vignettes throughout the book to tell particular stories that have moved me since I myself was a child. The historical details in the fictionalized vignettes are precise. Read them and experience the emotion the story evokes: excitement, bewilderment, pain, horror, pride, sorrow, or wonderment.

It is also important that an accurate record exists. This book is heavily researched and documented for those who wish to explore further. There are also new sources that create fresh reading for Modoc history buffs.

Even though I am of Modoc descent, I have tried to show all sides of this conflict in an unbiased, well-researched way. As a result, I have a solid understanding of the background and pattern of the war, know the Modocs better as individuals, and have come to know certain settlers, soldiers and government officials well. I feel related to them all.

What I know is that the bitterness of the past must be just that—past. The understanding and lessons derived from the war must be used to build a better, more tolerant world today and a stepping-stone to the future. We must acknowledge, in the Indian way of thinking, that all living things, including human beings, are interrelated. We are here to care for one another.

—Cheewa Patricia James, 2007