

Lava Beds

National Monument

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A Brief History of the Modoc War

Sagebrush-covered lava plateaus and wooded mountains of northern California and southern Oregon were the homeland of the Modoc Indians. Their domed dwellings were scattered along the shores of Tule Lake and Lost River where they lived on fish and waterfowl, wild game, and seeds and bulbs from the surrounding countryside.

As settling began on Lost River, emigrants demanded that the Modocs be removed from their homes and placed on the Klamath Reservation with the Klamath and Snake Indians. The Modocs and the Klamaths were historic enemies; the Modocs' relationship with the Snakes was not much better. For Kientpoos, a young Modoc Indian, the Klamath reservation would never be home.

Kientpoos and other Modocs left the Klamath reservation, demanding their own reservation on the Lost River. However, Modoc presence unnerved the settlers who insisted the Indians again be removed. Oregon Indian Superintendent Alfred Meacham convinced Kientpoos to move to the reservation. Upon returning, the Modocs were harassed by the Klamaths and in April 1869, Kientpoos and 371 Modocs moved once again to their Lost River home. Negotiations with them became impossible.

On November 28, 1872, pressured by settlers, Major Green sent troops from Fort Klamath to move the Modocs, "by force if necessary," back to the reservation. Many more Modocs were encountered than the Army had expected. Fighting soon broke out, and the Modocs fled as the troops burned their village. The Modoc War had begun!

The Modocs were composed of three bands that were somewhat loosely following the leadership of Kientpoos. One group, under the leadership of Hooker Jim, proceeded east around Tule Lake killing 14 male settlers in retaliation for the attack by the troops. Kientpoos, known to the settlers as Captain Jack, and the rest of the Modocs from Lost River headed across Tule Lake by boat and entered the Lava Beds. They were later joined by Hooker Jim's band. Kientpoos reluctantly accepted them, fearing he may be placing the other Modocs' lives in danger by allowing those who had murdered the settlers to stay. Another band of Modocs, the Creeks, eventually joined them after they had been tricked by settlers into thinking that they were all going to be hanged for being Modocs.

Along the shores of Tule Lake, ancient lava flows have formed a rugged, uneven terrain which became known as Captain Jack's Stronghold. The area is cut with deep lava trenches and dotted with small habitable caves, creating a natural fortification and a seemingly endless variety of places where one could move unnoticed. Over 300 troops and volunteers were organized to drive the approximately 50 Modoc men and their women and children from the Stronghold. On the foggy morning of January 16, 1873, the troops headed over what they believed was flat land, confident of a Modoc surrender. The Modocs inflicted heavy losses from the cover of their rough terrain. Confused by the fog and exhausted by the bitter cold and terrain, the troops retreated, leaving their weapons, ammunition, and wounded. The Modocs had won a decisive victory and now had a bargaining advantage.

Many meetings took place between Army leaders and Captain Jack. Each meeting found Captain Jack still requesting a Lost River reservation. To avert further fighting, President Grant organized a Peace Commission to meet unarmed with the Modoc Leaders. Captain Jack was willing to negotiate for a peaceful settlement, but Hooker Jim, indicted for murder, had little to gain from a peaceful settlement. Together with Curly-headed Doctor (a shaman, jealous of Captain Jack's power) they shamed Captain Jack into a plot to kill the Peace Commissioners.

The night before the meeting, Modocs Barncho and Slolux, laden with rifles, hid among the rocks near the peace tent. On the morning of April 11, 1873, General Canby, Reverend Thomas, Commission Head Alfred Meacham, and Indian Agent Leroy Dyar left for the meeting. It was arranged that five unarmed Modocs would meet with the commissioners. Upon reaching the peace tent, the commissioners found not five but eight Modocs, two of which were obviously armed. Captain Jack, Schonchin John, Boston Charlie, and Black Jim were among the eight, and again requested a Lost River reservation. When this could not be granted Captain Jack drew a revolver and killed Canby. Boston Charlie killed Thomas. Meacham was wounded and Dyar escaped unharmed.

Reinforcements were hastily called and four days later the second attack on the Stronghold began. The plan to surround the Stronghold was not completed but the Modocs were cut off from water. On April 17, the troops captured the Stronghold only to find it empty. Captain Jack and the other Modocs had escaped south to the Schonchin Lava Flow through an unguarded trench. Here they obtained water for their 160 men, women and children from the nearby ice caves.

On the morning of May 10 the Modocs were defeated in their surprise attack on troops camped at Dry Lake, leaving most of their horses and supplies in a hasty retreat. Ellen's Man George, who was well-liked by all three bands of Modocs, was killed, and the whole affair was devastating for the Modocs. The protection guaranteed by the shaman was no longer effective and as the Modocs began to quarrel they dissolved into small bands. Hooker Jim left with three men from his band, and ten of the Hot Creek band, along with their women and children. They headed west toward the present-day town of Dorris. Captain Jack and his followers left for Big Sand Butte.

As troops headed west, expecting to locate Captain Jack, they found Hooker Jim and his followers who surrendered. Hooker Jim offered to track down Captain Jack. Captain Jack finally surrendered at Willow Creek on June 1, 1873, and the Modoc War ended.

Amnesty was granted to Hooker Jim and his followers (who had murdered the 14 settlers at Tule Lake) for their assistance in the capture of Captain Jack. Those who had attacked the peace commissioners were placed on trial at Fort Klamath and convicted of murder. At the last moment, President Grant awarded amnesty to Barncho and Slolux who were sent to Alcatraz. Boston Charlie, Black Jim, Schonchin John, and Captain Jack were hanged on the morning of October 3, 1873. The surviving Modocs were taken to the Quapaw Agency in Oklahoma where disease accomplished what bullets could not.

This was the only major Indian war fought in California and the only Indian War in which a general was killed. It was one of the most costly wars in our history, considering the numbers of people involved. This era of Indian resistance to the settling of their homelands by white men is an integral part of our American heritage. As the events of the past unite all mankind, let us remember that the cultural identity of an entire people was lost here...so settlers could graze a few cows.

Rick Houston, 1983