



The Modoc Way



Early Residents

The Modoc people once lived on both sides of what is now the California- Oregon border in winter villages around Tule, Lower Klamath, and Clear Lakes, and along the Lost and Sprague Rivers. Like the ancient people who first inhabited this area more than 11,000 years ago, they took advantage of abundant waterfowl and game, edible and medicinal plants, and the easily accessible water supply. They moved freely around the region with the seasons until settlers appeared in the 19th century. Then the pattern of Modoc life began to change. The Modoc, a fiercely independent people, began to clash with some of the newcomers that claimed homesteads in their territory. The seeds were sown for one of the most devastating of the Indian Wars: the Modoc War of 1872- 73.

Seasonal Life

The southern Modoc band that inhabited this area followed a seasonal round from permanent winter villages on lowland lakeshores, south into the Medicine Lake highlands, and back again. Along the way, many places of spiritual importance throughout their homeland were visited by Modoc leaders and other tribal members, especially young men and women coming of age.

The annual journey began with the end of the last winter storms, when wildflowers signaled the coming of spring. Groups of domed huts made of tule reeds were erected along Lost River between Tule and Clear Lakes. Here the Modoc could take advantage of spawning fish runs, as well as plentiful bird eggs, roots, and berries.

With the coming of summer, the Modoc moved south to hunt mule deer and other game animals from other temporary camps in the forested highlands. They also gathered nuts and berries from pine trees and manzanita bushes.

Autumn was a crucial time for the Modoc people to get ready for the coming winter. Berries, deer meat, and fish were dried in preparation for storage at permanent winter residences. Their earth lodges, as many as twenty in each village, were rebuilt or repaired to provide shelter from cold winter winds. Firewood was gathered and animal skin blankets prepared. Once inside these warm lodges, elders repaired broken tools and wove baskets while recounting tribal history in legend and song to younger generations.

Plant and Animal Uses

The Modoc used many plants in this area for food, medicine, tools, or a combination of all three. Modoc women were responsible for gathering and preparing food. *Wocas* (water lily) provided a staple of their diet. Its seeds were ground into meal or flour in rock mortars. Tule reeds, sagebrush, and other fibrous plants provided material for baskets, mats, sandals, rope, nets, and other household items.

The Modoc developed intricate fishing and hunting implements from local materials. They fashioned several types of boats and rafts for fishing and transportation. Seasonal vessels were made from tule reeds, while longer lasting dugout canoes were burned and scraped from large pine logs. Nets of woven tule fibers weighted with lava rocks were used to catch fish. Waterfowl were also caught in nets as they flew over ridge tops.

On land, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and Bighorn sheep were staples of the hunt. Modoc men used obsidian- tipped arrows and spears and stone bolas to kill various types of game. Bows were constructed from juniper limbs with bowstrings of deer sinew. Arrow shafts were constructed from tule reeds. Arrowheads were chipped from razor- sharp pieces of obsidian gathered from the highlands and worked with deer antler tools.

The hunt was an important part of Modoc life, and preparation usually involved spending time in a sweat lodge. This roofed pit was heated with hot rocks from a fire outside. After several hours, Modoc men would dive into a nearby lake or river to cool off and rid themselves of human odors. Women participated separately in sweat lodges, and they were also used for spiritual purposes.

Early Contact

The Modoc way of life was forever changed when newcomers arrived in their homeland. Contact with whites began when explorers first entered the Klamath Basin in 1826, introducing new technological opportunities as well as devastating new diseases. The population of whites exploded when the Applegate Trail was blazed through the heart of Modoc territory in 1846. Over time, some settlers and Modoc alike strove to understand each other as the two cultures mixed. Many Modoc adopted elements of white culture that suited them, and some male settlers married Modoc women. The Modoc and settlers engaged in trade for goods that each side needed, and some Modoc men worked for settlers in local towns and on ranches. The introduction of horses into Modoc life allowed them to cover much more ground in warfare and trade than they could on foot. Most Modoc also adopted articles of settler clothing and began using imported metal items such as cooking pots and guns.

Despite such peaceful cultural exchanges, conflicts escalated as more and more settlers laid claim to Modoc lands. Both sides carried out violent attacks against each other, and resentments—especially over incidents in which women and children were killed—lasted for decades. By the 1860's, some settlers demanded that the government remove all the Modoc to the Klamath Reservation north of Klamath Falls. Some Modoc in turn demanded they be allowed to stay on at least part of their southern homeland. The stage was set for the Modoc War.

Toby Riddle, known to whites as “Winema,” was a Modoc who represented the extremes of a time period when many Modoc found themselves caught between two worlds. Toby married a white fur trapper, Frank Riddle, and the two served as translators between the Army and Modoc during the war. Toby took great risks by warning peace commissioners of an impending Modoc attack. It is through the memories of her descendants that we have come to understand much of the Modoc perspective on the war.

The Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma

The Modoc War of 1872- 73 had a devastating impact on the Modoc people. After the war ended, 155 Modoc who had fought alongside Captain Jack in the lava beds were transported over 2,000 miles by rail to the Quapaw Reservation in Oklahoma. For these Modoc, this marked the beginning of a struggle for cultural survival in the history of their people. Where were the grasses and reeds they needed to make their fine baskets? Where were the lakes, teeming with millions of waterfowl, and the winter herds of game? What of the spirits of their ancestors left behind?

Disease soon spread through the tribe in Oklahoma, as they lacked resistance to new illnesses. As the Modoc tried to adapt to planting and eating strange crops, they were weakened by malaria. Thirty- three died in a single year. By the turn of the century twenty- seven years later, there were fewer than 50 Modoc on the rolls of the Quapaw Agency. Even so, the Modoc demonstrated their historic tenacity by working hard to make their land productive and to

increase their herds of livestock. By the sixth year after their arrival, they were providing 50 percent of their own subsistence, though one-third of them had died. The Modoc further supplemented their meager government rations by working for settlers, by making and selling the popular arts and crafts of other tribes, and by driving teams of livestock between the reservation and the railhead.

The Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma today is composed of descendants of only seven of the 155 prisoners of war. Though much of their original culture could not be maintained in Oklahoma, the Modoc are now part of an eight- tribe council made up of native people from all parts of the country. Some dances and traditions of other tribes have been adopted. More than a century after their exile, the Modoc of Oklahoma have continued to adapt to life in a new land, raising cattle and establishing businesses with their neighbors. Their history is one of change and persistence—both an end and a beginning for a people and their way of life.

The Modoc of Oregon

During the Modoc War, many Modoc never became involved in the conflict. Unlike Captain Jack's band, members of a northern band of Modoc were never exiled to Oklahoma. They were, however, forced to remain on the Klamath Reservation, on the homeland of their Klamath neighbors instead of on their own land. Though the climate and resources were similar to those to which they were accustomed, there were daily reminders that they were not home. They lived and dealt in close quarters with Indian Agents as well as Klamaths and Yahooskins, and many conflicts occurred. Like all American Indians on reservations in the 19th century, they were also forbidden to perform spiritual practices or to speak their native language.

All three tribes came to be recognized by the federal government as the Klamath Tribes, and they engaged in many profitable ventures into the twentieth century in ranching, freighting, and the timber industry. In 1954, however, the Klamath Tribes were terminated from federal recognition. After a legal struggle spanning decades, they were successful in regaining status as a federally-recognized tribe in 1986. A Restoration Celebration is held every August in Chiloquin, Oregon to mark the event.

The Modoc in Oregon have retained some aspects of their traditional culture, while others have changed. Though everyday life today on the Klamath Reservation is modern, arrowheads are still made, wokus is gathered and processed, and tribal history is passed on.

The Lava Beds Today

About 700 people of Modoc descent now live in Oregon, Oklahoma, and throughout the United States. For over a century after the Modoc War, the lava beds were viewed as a place of tragedy by many Modoc people. In 1990, the Klamath Tribes and the Modoc of Oklahoma returned to their ancestral homeland for a reunion. These gatherings are now held every July, serving to reconnect the Modoc to the many places in the lava beds of traditional importance.

Preserved as a national monument since 1925, the lava beds look much the same as they did when Captain Jack and his followers came home to the Stonghold during the Modoc War. This protected landscape now provides a place for people of all backgrounds to not only contemplate the events of that conflict, but to experience the Modoc homeland much as it has been for millenia.