

Lava Beds

National Monument

National Park Service

The Modocs of Oregon

Our traditional methods of studying history tend to lead us down some rather narrow paths. A study of the Modoc War is not about peace. It is about war. It begins with the placing of the Modocs on the Klamath Reservation and their leaving that reservation in disgust. It leads us to the battlefields in the lava beds and on to the assassination of the peace commissioners, to the court-martial of the assassins, to the exile of the prisoners of war to Oklahoma, and to the end of the traditional culture of the Modoc people.

There were, however, many Modocs who never left the reservation and never became involved in war. They never assassinated anyone and never went to trial. They *were* exiled, not to Oklahoma but to the Klamath Reservation. Since the reservation was not far from their ancestral homeland, the climate and the resources were the same as those to which they were accustomed. There *was*, however, the nagging, daily reminder that they were on someone else's homeland, not their own and like all Native Americans on reservations in the nineteenth century, they were forbidden to practice their traditional religion and forbidden to speak their native language.

There was one Modoc who was caught between the extremes. Toby Riddle was paid by the army for her services as a translator. Some may call her a traitor to her people; some, a peacemaker. In an age when women were not to meddle in the affairs of men she took great risks to save lives. She warned the commissioners of the impending attack. During the attack she saved one's life by calling out, "Soldiers coming! Soldiers coming!" when in fact there were none. The warriors quickly abandoned the scene and the commissioner was saved from being scalped and left to die.

A Modoc living in the soldier camp, she undoubtedly had knowledge about the "affairs of men" on both sides that others had not. It is from her, through her descendants, that we come to know much about the Modoc side of the war. Her great granddaughter, Alice Chipps, is the oldest known living Modoc today. Alice's great grandson, Roland Jackson, made these earrings.

It is difficult today to trace the ancestry of all Modocs in Oregon, but there are about 500, all descendants of those who never left the reservation.

For 117 years after the Modoc War, Lava Beds was an uninviting place to Modoc descendants; "a cemetery" to some. In 1990 they were invited by the National Park Service to return to their ancestral homeland to drum, dance, and sing where their ancestors drummed, danced, and sang for thousands of years and where their spirits *still* sing. During closing ceremonies that year the Lava Beds staff became the first white people in history to smoke a pipe with the Modoc people. Now such gatherings are annual affairs, held on the third weekend of every July.

Roland's earrings are sold here as statements about that first gathering. Today, the Modocs are back! Spiritually, they were never really gone!

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The Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma

With the end of the Modoc War in 1873 the cultural identity of an entire people was lost. For the Modocs displaced to Oklahoma, their arrival at the Quapaw Reservation marked the beginning of the most desperate struggle for 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? Where were the winter herds, the rabbits, the squirrels? What of the spirits of their ancestors left behind, and what would be the fate of theirs in this strange and alien land?

Weakened with malaria, they were compelled to clear and cultivate the land to raise strange crops. Disease was destined to accomplish that which army bullets had not. Thirty-three of them died in a single year (while the Indian Agency reported only ten). By the turn of the century there were fewer than fifty Modocs on the rolls of the Quapaw Agency.

The Modocs demonstrated their historic tenacity by working hard to make their land productive and to increase their herds of livestock. By 1877 they were providing 40% of their own subsistence. Two years later, though one third of them were now dead, they had increased their own production to 50%. The Modocs further supplemented their meager government rations by working for whites in the border settlements, by making and selling the popular arts and crafts of other tribes, and by driving teams between the reservation and the railhead.

Today the Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma is comprised of some 200 people, descendants of only seven of the original 155 prisoners of war. Their family heirlooms consist of a few dozen photographs, mostly of unidentified Modocs; a few baskets, made by long-forgotten great grandmothers; 2 hunting bows, presented to the local county museum by an uncle no one can quite remember. No young girls today weave traditional baskets as they were taught by their mothers who were taught by *their* mothers. No young boys learn traditional dances or make costumes to celebrate the great spirits. No grandfather relates the stories of the animal people to wide-eyed youngsters as they were related to him so many, many times so many, many years ago.

The *ancient* culture of the Modocs is forever lost. At Pow-wows today Modocs dance the Gourd Dance, a traditional dance of plains Indians who, even among themselves, argue its origins. Modoc costumes are based largely on the costumes of neighboring tribes. With no culture of their own to interpret, Modocs make souvenirs which are popular among their neighbors. No Modoc ever wore a feather headdress, but as it has become an Indian symbol to white visitors, so it is with the Modocs and other tribes.

Their key chains then, represent not the tradition of the Modocs of the *Lava Beds*, but the tradition of the Modocs of *Oklahoma* as they seek to interpret a culture that long ago ceased to exist. They represent at once the end of a people and the beginning of a people. They are made by volunteers in the Tribal Office. Money from these sales is the only source of income supporting the daily operations of the Tribal Office.