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CAPTAIN JACK'S STRONGHOLD

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CAPTAIN JACK'S STRONGHOLD

The military post of Fort Klamath, Oregon, was bustling with activity on the morning of October 3, 1873. Settlers for hundreds of miles around had been pouring into the small garrison for a week by any convenient means of transportation - in buggies, coaches, sulkies, buckboards, heavy wagons, and on horseback. Several people had even crossed the continent in order to see the remarkable events of that day. Hundreds of Klamath Indians had left their reservation north of Lost River Valley to be present, for the day's main attraction would be particularly valuable in pointing the moral of the white man's punishment of Indian perfidy.¹

The crowd was gathered there to see the closing scene in the drama of the Modoc War - the execution of the Indian leaders. As the post troops formed their ranks around three sides of the massive gallows, the crowd, densely packed and tingling with excitement, saw an escort of soldiers march out of the guard-house with four Modocs. These were Captain Jack, Sconchin, Black Jim, and Boston Charley. Most eyes,

1. San Francisco Alta California, October 4, 1873; San Francisco Chronicle, October 3, 1873.

however, were turned to the slight figure of Captain Jack. It was through his leadership that a small band of about eighty Indians had been able for five months to hold off military forces which, by the time victory was gained, had increased to more than a thousand men.²

Very few witnesses of the scene knew Captain Jack by his rightful name of Keintpoos.³ The mining camps had for years given him the officer's title because of his addition of some military decorations to his otherwise commonplace dress of dark calico shirt, soiled military pantaloons, and cloth cap. The thirty-six year old leader was small in build, weighing about 145 pounds. With black, sharp eyes set in a swarthy face, prominent cheek bones, symmetrical and slightly aquiline nose, thin and clean-cut lips, and a resolute chin, he was not a pleasant sight to the white settlers of Northern California and Oregon. But, according to an eye-witness, if he were placed "...among a thousand Indians... he would be thought the Chief by an observing stranger."⁴

The execution of Captain Jack ended the last major effort of a California Indian tribe to retain its freedom

2. H. H. Bancroft, History of Oregon, II, 630.

3. Ibid., 556. A. B. Meacham, Wigwam and warpath; or the royal chief in chains, 295, names him Ki-en-te-poos.

4. Portland Oregonian, June 3, 7, 1873; Bancroft, Oregon, II, 556, 631.

and the control of its traditional hunting grounds. The Modocs ranged the Lost River country before the white men came, finding their sustenance, largely, by fishing. When gold was discovered in Northern California and Southern Oregon in the early 1850s, white settlements began to appear in the Indians' country, foretelling the doom of their liberty. Within a short time, the pressure of miners and settlers resulted in the establishment of the Klamath reservation in Southern Oregon, on which the Indians of the region were to be settled.

The Klamaths, a tribe closely related to the Modocs, readily agreed to move to the reservation. But the Modocs, after having signed the same treaty as the Klamaths in 1864, refused to abide by its terms. They called attention to an earlier agreement, which allowed them to live on their old grounds and visit white settlements freely, in return for their promise to refrain from quarreling among themselves, from theft, child-selling, drunkenness, and prostitution in the white camps. The argument that the first treaty was not binding because it had not been ratified by congress was, of course, incomprehensible to them. Captain Jack, therefore, continued to range his old country.

The settlers on both sides of the state line, complaining of petty thieving and general "cussedness," petitioned the authorities to move the Modocs to the reservation.

Although attempts were made to induce Captain Jack to establish his tribe peaceably, negotiations failed. The use of force was advocated early, but it was felt that the post at Fort Klamath was not large enough to cope with Jack's band. Finally, after years of delay, the settlers of the district around Tule and Clear lakes succeeded in having Indian Commissioner T. B. Odeneal issue an order, early in 1872, to remove the Indians, "peaceably if you can, forcibly if you must."⁵

A small detachment of thirty-six troops under the command of Captain James Jackson was sent to arrest the leaders in November. They met on the 29th when the Indians' stubborn refusal to yield and the impolitic tactics of the white men combined to start actual hostilities.⁶ After a short battle in which fifteen Modocs were shot down, and the cavalry lost one man killed and seven wounded, Captain Jack retreated with his tribe to the lava beds on the south shore of Tule Lake.

Hostilities were then fairly under way. For more than five months the Modocs were able to resist all attempts to dislodge them from their position. The lava formation,

5. Bancroft, Oregon, II, 557-570.

6. J. C. Riddle, The Indian history of the Modoc war, 45; Bancroft, Oregon, II, 573-574; Meacham, Wigwam and war-path, 368-369.

an area about ten miles square, which was appropriately called by the Indians "The Land of Burned Out Fires," provided an easily defensible natural fortress. It is a bewildering honeycomb of high rocks, deep fissures and gulches, abrupt cliffs, and sheltering caves of all sizes and shapes. The Modocs, long familiar with that area, used their knowledge of the natural breastworks, parapets, and trenches to good advantage. They were sheltered from attack, but could pick off attackers with little danger, since the rocks are surrounded by an almost level terrain over which the white troops had to cross and which provides no shelter or concealment. Hampering the sight and movement of the attackers were occasional fogs, another advantage for the besieged. Furthermore, the Indians were well armed with breech-loading rifles and a large supply of cartridges. Food and water for the long siege were obtained from Tule Lake and by means of night raids.⁷

On the other hand, the troops had to contend with problems of conflicting jurisdictions, authorities and theories. Since the Modoc question affected both states, Governor Booth of California and Governor Grover of Oregon were

7. W. S. Brown, "The land of burned out fires" in Touring topics, XIX, No.8, August, 1927, 14, 38; Riddle, Indian history of the Modoc war, 54-55; Bancroft, Oregon, II, 581-582; H. L. Wells, History of Siskiyou County, 147-148.

requested, at the outbreak of the war, to furnish aid. Booth responded by sending obsolete arms and ammunition too large for the guns; Grover forwarded better equipment. The first three weeks of December were occupied, to a great extent, with the problems of supplying the troops with materiel, and with the political question of sending Oregon volunteers over the state line into California. These difficulties hampered the movements of the attackers. At the same time, the Modocs were granted a breathing spell during which they could organize their defenses. They also made several night excursions, attacking isolated wagon trains and raiding the countryside for food.⁸

The first important attack on the stronghold was made January 16th-17th when Colonel Green, directing the army forces, sent about 375 men forward to capture the Indian position. The protection afforded by the rock fortress and the foggy weather enabled the Modocs to repulse the attack without great difficulty. It was evident by that time that much larger forces would be required to dislodge the besieged Indians.

At the end of January, however, military offensive operations were halted by orders of the secretary of war. He

8. Bancroft, Oregon, II, 582-593.

had been convinced by Alfred B. Meacham, former superintendent of Indian affairs, that an effort should be made at that stage to arrive at a peaceful solution of the problem. The following instructions were issued to General E. R. S. Canby, commander of the Department of the Columbia: "Let all defensive measures proceed, but order no attack on the Indians until the former orders are modified or changed by the president, who seems disposed to allow the peace men to try their hands on Captain Jack."⁹

The commission of "peace men," after several changes, consisted of Meacham, E. Thomas, a Methodist preacher of Petaluma, California, and L. S. Dyar, of the Klamath agency. They were not ready to initiate discussions until the end of February. In the meantime, Captain Jack continued his policy of staging swift raids on weak outposts or wagon trains. The settlers, hardest hit by those operations, tried to have the orders which permitted no action except defense revoked, but to no avail; a peace effort had to be made.

Discussions were carried on throughout the month of March and into April. The Modocs demanded the Lost River country and their freedom; the white men offered the reservation life. Captain Jack, a shrewd, though unschooled, dip-

9. Bancroft, Oregon, II, 593-596.

lomatic genius, contrived, by keeping alive the hope of a peaceful settlement, to delay his opponents' activities, probably hoping to escape in the spring.¹⁰

What was to prove the last of these councils was held on April 11, 1873, when it was arranged that the peace commission and General Canby should confer with Jack and five other Modocs, both sides to be unarmed. Fearing treachery, however, Meacham and Dyar secretly carried pistols to the meeting; subsequent events justified their precaution.

Captain Jack designated a place between the two camps where the meeting should be held. The council opened in a friendly spirit. Canby explained that the Lost River country had been sold to settlers and could not be regained for the use of the Modocs. Jack agreed to renounce that claim, but countered with a request that his people be granted country around Cottonwood and Willow creeks. While discussion was carried on, the Indians moved about, taking positions whereby Jack was placed opposite Canby. Suddenly, two Indians hidden behind rocks appeared with arms, and Captain Jack gave the signal to commence an attack by drawing a concealed pistol which he fired at Canby. At the same time, the other Modocs opened fire on the commissioners. Meacham, wounded

10. Bancroft, Oregon, II, 597-609.

six times, and Dyar managed to escape the ambush, but Canby and Thomas were killed.¹¹

The disastrous conclusion to the peace negotiations sealed the fate of the Modocs. The killing of a major-general in the United States Army and a Methodist preacher caused countrywide protests; the extermination of the Modocs was sought by all. Immediately, the orders which limited the troops to defensive precautions were withdrawn. The president's new instructions were to make an "...attack so strong and persistent that their fate may be commensurate with their crime."¹²

A powerful attack on the Modoc position began on April 13 and was sustained until the Indians were driven out of their stronghold four days later. Their dislodgement was effected by troops closing in from the flanks and cutting off the water supply at Tule Lake.¹³ But the struggle was not yet over. The Modocs escaped from the lava beds and remained at large in the countryside. They continued to raid troop scouts and outposts, inflicting great damage.

Having forfeited their position in the lava beds,

11. Meacham, Wigwam and warpath, 462-507; Riddle, Indian history of the Modoc war, 77-98; Bancroft, Oregon, II, 608-613.

12. Portland Oregonian, April 15, 1873; New York Herald, April 20, 1873; Bancroft, Oregon, II, 613-615.

13. Bancroft, Oregon, II, 615-618.

however, the Indians had lost all hope for a compromise. It became merely a matter of time before they would be captured or killed. In an open country, the white man's superiority in numbers, arms and supplies made defeat inevitable. Although Captain Jack was an shrewd guerilla fighter and escaped for a long time all the traps laid to catch him, sixty-five Modocs were captured by May 20, including about one-third of his warriors.

The young chief, however, was still at large with about twenty-five men. Some of the captives, in order to secure immunity from punishment, offered to assist in capturing the rest of the tribe. They served as scouts, led the troops to the Modocs' position near Langell's Valley, and by June 1, the war came to an end with the surrender of Captain Jack.¹⁴

By the time of Jack's capture, the original thirty-six soldiers sent to arrest him had grown to a formidable army of 985 regulars and seventy-one Indian allies. The losses of soldiers, civilians and allies totaled sixty-three killed, and the same number wounded. Captain Jack's fighting troops at the beginning of the war numbered about sixty, to which were added a score of allies from the Hot Creek

14. Bancroft, Oregon, II, 619-630.

tribe. It is interesting to note that only one of the besieged was killed throughout the entire campaign, and that his death occurred by the accidental explosion of a shell.¹⁵ Such was the protection afforded by the land of burned out fires.

The trial and execution of the leaders closed the tragic drama of the Modoc War. The remainder of the tribe were settled at Fort Russell in Wyoming, then moved to Fort McPherson in Nebraska, and finally established at the Tupa-paw agency in the Indian Territory.¹⁶

The lava formation, now known as Captain Jack's Stronghold, is today almost unchanged. Sage and brush have overgrown the battle sites, but the bleached bones of horses, fragments of shells and cartridges, and rotting pieces of leather can still be found among the rocks.¹⁷ The lava beds remain a memorial to Captain Jack and his Modocs, for theirs was the last struggle of a California tribe against the encroachments of the white man, ... "a war in some respects the most remarkable that ever occurred in the history of aboriginal extermination."

15. Bancroft, Oregon, II, 630.

16. Portland Oregonian, June 3, 1873; Bancroft, Oregon, II, 636.

17. H. E. and E. G. Rensch, and M. B. Hoover, Historic spots in California: Valley and Sierra counties, 443; Brown, "Land of burned out fires," 38.

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