

THE LAST WILD TRIBE OF CALIFORNIA*

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In the fall of 1908 some attention was aroused in the press by a story to the effect that hunters had encountered in the state of California a tribe of Indians who were still in the stone age. The idea of a "wild" tribe in a thickly settled region like California was so novel that it served to awaken a very wide interest. The Indians themselves, however, had meanwhile vanished. Some three years later an individual who had all the appearance of belonging to this group was apprehended in northern California. He was put in jail, and a few days later turned over to the university. Since then he has been received everywhere as the last survivor of his tribe. The whole series of incidents deserves some explanation. I think it ought to be said at the outset that the story as given in the papers of that period is quite true. The individual captured in 1911 was a surviving member of a stone-age tribe. He is still alive and well at the university; and he has given from time to time extremely interesting accounts of the history of his people.

I should like to explain first of all the rather unusual career of this tribe, and how they happened to remain "wild." The occupation of California by the whites is usually pictured as a peaceful transaction. We hear little of Indian wars in connection with this state. The California tribes pursued, as it happened, a more or less settled mode of life. Being non-migratory, they were peculiarly open to attack and reprisal for any resistance they could have offered to the white invasion. The influx of whites moreover was on the whole so sudden and overwhelming that those Indian disturbances which did occur were soon forgotten. It is quite possible that if California had been settled one family at a time as New England was, "massacres" and "wars" would have occurred that would have rung down the ages like the wars waged by the Indians on the Colonies. If there had been a long course of conflicts, our California tribes might have developed a name for ferocity like that enjoyed by the Mohawk, or the Apache. As a matter of fact, the white occupation here was accomplished by violence and bloodshed, and through armed conflict with the natives far and wide. The U. S. Army records show almost as many movements of troops against the Indians as occurred in any other area of the same extent. The whole period of "occupation" was so short, however, that Indian troubles for the most part were soon things of the past.

So much for the general situation in California. In the wild and rugged part of the state, Indian resistance lasted for a long time. One such area was west of the Sacramento in the Siskiyou region, along the upper waters of the Trinity and Eel rivers. "Bad" Indians used to frequent the wilds in this part of the state long after the tribal organizations had broken down. Such Indians caused some little trouble to enter-

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prising settlers in the hills. A region where the Indian opposition was still more spirited and where Indian disturbances dragged out still longer was in northeastern California. Here the Pitt River Indians, and later the Modocs, put up a number of very spirited contests before knuckling under. The whites, on the whole, were very bitter towards "wild" Indians, even when harmless, and blamed them for everything, from the occurrence of freshets to the presence of potato-bugs.

It must of course be recognized that the occupation of California by the whites was inevitable. The Indians had to be dispossessed to make room for the new order. The white occupation, however, was not only inevitable, it was relentless. The methods used are not a thing of which we can be proud. The whites, for example, introduced into California, where it was unknown prior to their coming, the practise of scalping. It was very much the fashion in the early days for white settlers and miners to carry on Indian wars individually and informally. The line between their actions and plain murder is rather hard to draw. Many of the white loafers and irresponsibles that "bummed" around the frontier settlements used to preach openly a doctrine of "exterminating" the Indians. A very considerable proportion of our "Indian fighters" in this state deserved, in strict justice, to be hung. It may throw some light in general on the nature and methods of these "wars" to state that there existed in California, long after the close of the civil war, a lively traffic in Indian slaves. White administration of Indian affairs in the more easterly states impresses one most by its hopeless stupidity. The history of whites and Indians in California impresses one rather with a sense of the white man's ruthlessness.

The Yahi Tribe

In the northeastern part of the Sacramento valley there lived a nation of Indians who were early driven into a vigorous hostility to the whites. They had already, from their friction with other tribes, developed some adeptness in raiding and thieving, and in a sort of guerilla warfare. Their northern branch, the so-called Nozi, after a time capitulated, and became hangers-on of civilization. The southern branch of the stock, calling themselves simply Yahi, or "people," and inhabiting a stretch of country immediately east of the Sacramento, kept the whites in a state of uncertainty for a considerably longer time. There is one relatively small region in particular which came to be specially identified with this small group of Indians. That is the country immediately about Mill Creek. East of the Sacramento, along the waters of Antelope Creek, Mill Creek, Dry Creek, Deer Creek and Butte Creek, the country is covered with a cap of lava. The original source of this lava was, I believe, the mountain which has recently been attracting so much attention to itself -- Lassen Butte. The elevation of the region frequented by hostile Indians is not great (it all lies below the level of the pine forest) but the streams have cut in the lava a large number of rough cañons and gullies. Near as it is to the level valley, the country is extremely rugged. Cliffs, crags, and sudden promontories are frequent, and there are great numbers of caves. While the settlement and cultivation of the valley has gone forward very rapidly, this region in the foothills has remained almost untouched. To-day this "lava" country is the resort of animals (and to a certain extent, of

plants) which are becoming extinct elsewhere. In this small region in north central California the Yahi made a determined stand against civilization.

In the course of their life in these cañons they developed an intense hatred and fear of the whites. They came to be hunted very much like wild animals. Accordingly they developed peculiar habits of visiting the valley in sudden forays, escaping instantly to the hills afterwards. These sudden visitations, often resulting in the loss of life as well as property, were a genuine bugbear to homesteaders. On the other hand, the Indians were on their part often harried by famine. Pressure from the whites prevented them from making full use of the natural foods the country afforded. Even acorn-gathering was for them a dangerous pursuit, since it gave opportunity for white attack. Their natural means of subsistence therefore seem to have been almost entirely cut off. An idea of their desperation may be gathered from the fact that on at least one occasion when they attacked the whites and were chased, their plunder consisted of a mule-load of vegetables. In other words, they took the field and risked their lives for the sake of a few squashes and some ears of corn.

It has always been supposed that remnants of several tribes made up these Mill Creek renegades. From what we have recently learned, it seems very unlikely that there was more than one tribe involved. In the first place, the only member of this hostile group who has ever been questioned, expresses the liveliest dislike of all other tribes. He seems, and always has seemed, more ready to make friends with the whites themselves, than with the neighboring groups of Indians. In the second place, all the other Indian tribes of the region profess the liveliest horror of the Yahi. This awe extends even to the country to-day which the Yahi frequented. Even the Yahi and the Nozi, though they spoke dialects of one language (the so-called Yana) express the most unrelenting hostility for each other. In other words, the Indians who lurked about in the Mill Creek hills for several decades after the settlement of the valley, were probably the remnant of a comparatively pure group, since there was little likelihood of intermixture.

The Mill Creek "War"

Between the years 1850 and 1865 this group was more or less under observation by the government. Rumors of battle, murder and sudden death came frequently from this region to the central authorities in San Francisco and Sacramento. On one or two occasions attempts were made by the War Department to apply the universal remedy for Indian troubles -- removal to a reservation. Details concerning the movement of troops and some very heated correspondence relative to this tribe may be found in the government records (War Records, Volume 50). The names of some very distinguished Californians appear in this connection. I recall especially Governor Stanford, and General Albert Sydney Johnston. The only book I know of which deals exclusively with events in the Yahi region is a small but vivid volume written by R. A. Anderson, an actor in the events, and sometime sheriff of Butte County ("Fighting the Mill Creeks," Chico, Cal., 1909).

This little work checks up with the records of the War Department. The "war" with this small tribe seems to be quite overlooked in the histories of California. There is no mention of it in either Bancroft or Hittell. The reason probably is that it was very much like what had happened, or was happening, on a larger scale elsewhere. The War Department correspondence is quite full for the period covered.

The end of the Mill Creek "war" was unusual and to some extent tragic. A party of armed whites, acting without other authority than resentment and an inborn savagery, surprised the tribe on the upper waters of Mill Creek in 1865. Their effort apparently was to wipe out this Indian group on the spot. On the admission of men who took part in the action, fire was opened on the defenceless Indians in the early morning, and an uncertain number of them, men, women and children, shot down. A few, not more than three or four, perhaps, escaped into the brush and got clear. The Mill Creek tribe as a tribe disappeared from history at this time. With one or two possible exceptions, nothing was seen of it again for over thirty-five years.

Hidden Life of the Survivors

The survivors who escaped these executive measures of 1865 were too few in number to resume their old mode of life. They were, on the other hand, so small a party that they succeeded in hiding away. Little by little they emerged from their hiding places and took up again the procuring of food by hunting and fishing. They did not, however, allow themselves to be seen. They undoubtedly expected annihilation to follow on discovery, and probably there was sound judgment behind this belief. The almost entire absence of information concerning them proves that they took to the wildest places, and stayed there. All that we positively know about them is that they disappeared in 1865, but were still alive in 1908. Under the circumstances, they must have remained "primitive." Only the primitive mode of life was open to them. They were primitive when they went into retirement, and it was their salvation. When seen again in 1908 they still used the bow and arrow and other aboriginal appliances, and were absolutely unfamiliar with the usages of civilization. Their avoidance of observation of any kind left them as isolated as if they had been literally on another continent.

Our information concerning them during this period is very scanty. The existence of "wild" Indians in this part of the world was known, or at least believed in, in many quarters, in spite of definite information. Thus Stephen Powers in his classical "Tribes of California" (U. S. Department of the Interior, Contributions to North American Ethnology, Vol. 3) says, without giving names, that five of this tribe, two men, two women, and a boy, were seen in 1870. This group gave from time to time further proof of their existence by their habit of secretly taking food from distant and lonely mountain cabins. It is a settled fact, that this fugitive remnant of a tribe did fairly well with their primitive mode of life, except in the late winter and early spring. By that time their stores were usually exhausted and the salmon had not yet begun to run in

the streams. Their fear of the whites forbade any change of home or habitation in search of food. The only course possible, aside from quiet starvation, was to seek out some white man's cabin somewhere in the hills, help themselves to food as quickly as possible, and carry it back to their lurking places. This they seem to have done on several occasions almost every year. To this we probably owe the fact that the group managed to remain alive. This robbing of cabins could not, of course, pass unnoticed. Such cabins as exist in these hills are mere temporary shelters, utilized by wandering hunters and stockmen. Any passer-by, according to the custom of the country, is at liberty to invite himself into a cabin if he happens to find one that is in use at all, and is supposed to give himself full rights and privileges, including the use of all solids and liquids. This is a sort of informal hospitality which prevails universally. The Indians, when compelled to risk discovery in visiting a cabin, took as much food as they possibly could, to lessen the chances of having to make another trip, and ran away. They usually made a systematic collection of everything eatable, down to the last scrap, and carried it off. While the mountaineer has liberal notions of hospitality, they do not extend to this. The visits of the Indians were bitterly resented. They left their unwilling host in most cases, on his return, no resource but to walk back to civilization, empty within and without.

Such food-gathering expeditions were conducted with true Indian slyness. In spite of the fact that such "robberies" were fairly frequent, and extended over a period of thirty years, the Indians were never seen. Not only that, but no one ever found so much as a track or footprint. Often the only trace the Indians left of their presence was a total disappearance of everything edible. On one occasion a white mother returned to her homestead from berry-picking with two small children, to find nothing in her larder but two cold boiled potatoes. On another occasion, two mountaineers, who left in their camp two months' provisions, found on their return only part of a sack of barley. On other occasions the Indians took from camps even the barley that was intended for horse feed. Many of these robberies might have been blamed to white men, except for the fact that stuff was taken which a white man would not bother with; for example, the barley just mentioned. While useless to a white, it was readily usable by starving Indians who were accustomed to making food out of acorns and grass seeds, and had at hand their primitive devices for milling such things. On the other hand, the small quantities of canned stuff found in the cabins and camps were never touched. The Indians seemed to have a peculiar fear of it, perhaps from one or two unfortunate experiences, with canned goods that had spoiled. On at least one occasion there was taken from a cabin a small quantity of flour conspicuously labelled poisoned. No white man would have taken chances with this flour, however hungry.

More than once on such expeditions the Indians were perilously near exposure. Once an excited white man, with a repeating rifle and dogs, trailed them so closely that in crossing a stream they dropped a piece of headgear in their hurry. This headdress, fearfully and wonderfully wrought out of scraps of a dozen different fabrics, is now in our Museum. At the time of this escape the Indians were not seen, though where they had forded the stream the rocks were still wet.

Mere chance on several occasions nearly resulted in discovery for them. A hunter one time, passing along in the winter, noticed a low smoke rising out of a snow-covered thicket across a stream where he knew that no white man would have been. Later on, after the final emergence of the tribe from their obscurity, we found the remains of one of their encampments in this very thicket.

Such is the only actual evidence we have of the life of this tribe for over a generation. The most important change within that period is a shift in their habitat. After the massacre of '65 they lived at various places up and down the stream known as Mill Creek, robbing cabins when driven by famine. After 1885 however no more cabins were robbed along this stream. The Indians were evidently driven out by the increasing degree of settlement. The next stream to the south is known as Deer Creek. The gorge through which this stream passes is rugged and wild in the extreme. It is in fact one of the most picturesque cañons in California. The wildest part of the cañon of Deer Creek was their last home.

Below the mouth of a side branch known as Sulphur Creek, the cliffs which hem in the main stream open out into a fairly wide valley. Between the base of the cliffs on the south side and the stream itself, is a long slope composed of lava detritus. This slope consists of rocks piled up in tremendous confusion, traversed with deep gullies, and overgrown with a perfect mat of scrub oak. The brush is so thick that it is practically impenetrable. Even sheep and cattle avoid the place. I doubt if such animals could make their way through it. Two or three miles through this thicket is a good day's work for a man. Here the Yahi tribe, or its remnant, found a final refuge. In one edge of this jungle, on a shoulder overlooking the stream, under some pepperwoods or laurel, they built some tiny lodges. To this locality and little village they gave the name of Bear's Hiding Place. The mountains and plateaus hereabout are useless for cultivation. The lava cliffs contain no metals. The country is quite unfrequented except for cattlemen and cowboys, who come at certain times of the year and "round up" their stock. Since the live stock never penetrated the jungle where the Indians lived, the stockmen also avoided it. Here for over twenty years the Indians lurked in peace.

They do not seem to have lived here exclusively. As far as we can gather at the present time, they ranged in the summer as far east as Mount Lassen. On the upper slopes of this tremendous peak they found plenty of game, and no one to disturb them. When it grew cold they returned to the foothills and passed the winter at Bear's Hiding Place. Near the lodges there is to be found a circular pit some three or four feet deep. This pit they were accustomed to pack full of snow. The melting of this snow gave them a supply of water and saved them the trouble and risk of going down to the creek, some five hundred feet below.

The village site has now been visited by a number of people, scientific and otherwise. I think they will all agree that the placing of the lodges was the work of people who were not only desperately anxious to hide themselves, but who knew thoroughly well how to do it. The houses

were built where they were invisible from the cliffs on either side. The Indians passed down to the creek, which was very important to them on account of the fish in it, under the shelter of a growth of laurel. Thus they could move about and still remain hidden. Moreover, they avoided making visible trails, especially near the water. The little path that leads down from the lodges under and through the thicket, ramifies and disappears as it approaches the stream. In other words, they went down by different ways, to avoid making one conspicuous pathway. In making the needful paths through the brush, they bent aside the necessary twigs. Cutting or breaking them would have made the path much more conspicuous. I doubt if an observer on the cliff would ever have seen the Indians if he had been looking directly down upon them. Altogether, the place and its selection showed considerable evidence of craft, and to the wandering hunter or rider on the mountains round about, the locality would have looked always like a genuine bear's hiding place, for all the evidence of human habitation to be seen.

The Breaking Up of the Hidden Village

Such was the life of this group until the year 1908. At that time a party of surveyors, on engineering business, happened by mere luck to encounter them. One evening a naked savage was suddenly observed, standing on a rock by the stream side, armed with a long spear. This resulted, from all accounts, in the equal alarm of all parties. The next morning, those members of the party who had not run all the way to camp, went down to the place, cast about in the brush, and finally came upon the Indian lodges. Two Indians, running for their lives, were actually seen -- one of them an old man, helped along by a middle-aged woman. This fleeting glimpse is all that we know of these individuals. They have never been seen again. Their actual fate is still unknown. In camp was found, under some blankets, a partially paralyzed old woman, frightened nearly to death, unable to move. The whites did what they could for this old person, then helped themselves, mainly in a spirit of curiosity, to the contents of the camp -- bows, arrows, skin blankets -- and after prying about, went back to camp for dinner. When they returned next day the old woman was gone.

Such was the tragic end of the last remnant of the Yahi tribe. Except for one individual, our account closes here. The members of the tribe who were seen at this time seem to have perished from cold, hunger, and exposure, without ever returning to their camp.

Nearly three years later, in August, 1911, at a slaughter-house four miles from Oroville, eighty miles away, one morning there suddenly appeared from nowhere a naked Indian. His only garment was an old castoff undershirt. He was thin, hungry, greatly worn, and of most unusual appearance. The people in charge of the premises telephoned to the sheriff and reported with some excitement the presence of a "wild man." No one, Indian or white, could make him understand a word. The sheriff of Butte County came out, took the wild man in charge and gave him, as the most available lodging, the insane cell of the jail. When the news reached the

university, the appearance of this strange Indian was at once connected with the Yahí tribe of Deer Creek, in which the department of anthropology had long been interested. It fell to the lot of the present writer to journey to Oroville to identify him. Our only resource was to "try him out" with a vocabulary in the Nozi dialect, since there was no material in existence in what was thought to be his own proper language. The first impression received of the wild Indian was the sight of him, draped in a canvas apron they had hurriedly put on him at the slaughter-house, sitting on the edge of a cot in his cell, still uncertain of his fate, and answering ulisi ("[I don't] understand") to all the questions that were being fired at him in English, Spanish, and half a dozen Indian languages, by visitors. The present writer's amateur attempts at Yana were equally unintelligible to him for a long time. An agreement was finally reached, however, on the word for the material of which his cot was made, si'win'i, or yellow pine. His face lightened up at this word, though he evidently could hardly trust his senses. These were probably the first intelligible sounds he had heard from a human being in three years.

Since those days he has become a regular member of the Museum staff. He has revisited Deer Creek cañon in our company, and there is not a foot of the country he does not know. There is not the slightest doubt that it has been his home. He led the party to the old lodges in the jungle at Bear's Hiding Place, he communicated scores of place-names up and down the stream for miles, and even led the way over to his old lurking places on Mill Creek, some distance to the north. In other words, he has told us all he could, in a general way, about the tribe. He has, however, been curiously backward in telling the intimate history of his own immediate group. He has gone so far as to say that the middle-aged woman who was seen was his sister, that the very old woman was his mother, that the old man, however, was not his father. In general he speaks of them with reluctance. His reasons for this are not at all mysterious. These people are dead, and to the Indian that is ample cause for avoiding all mention of them. In the first place, if, in the world of spirits, they hear their names being mentioned, they may take it (horror of horrors!) for a summons. Hence to taboo their names or any conversation about them is mere commonplace caution. Moreover, to speak of them and their life makes the survivor sad. At worst, to mention the dead is dreadful; at best, it is a serious disrespect. For all of these reasons our surviving tribesman avoids talking of his own personal history. It is all mixed up with that of these other, deceased persons. It is impossible to discuss recent events without bringing in their names, so he usually prefers to talk of other things. He is always ready to talk at length about the general mode of life of his people -- anything in fact that does not have personal details in it. He is anxious and enthusiastic in explaining his religious and mythical ideas. As a general thing, the more ancient the lore, the more volubly he discourses. We expect some day to insinuate ourselves behind his reserve, and learn the real history of his movements during the last three or four years before his "capture." His particular secretiveness in certain matters may be illustrated by the fact that he has never told us his own name. We address him usually in his own tongue as "Ishi," which means simply "man." His actual personal name is still unknown, and possibly always will be.

Two pictures are reproduced which were taken on the visit that he made in our company to his old haunts on Deer Creek. He was in familiar surroundings, thoroughly at home, told us details concerning the mode of life and enlarged in many directions on hunting and other tribal pursuits. Thus he named for us several hundred species of plants, and described in detail the uses to which his people put them. He is a very remarkable man, aside from his extraordinary personal history, and after all his hard life, very communicative and lovable. He is quite possibly, of all the Indians of North America to-day, the one who has most nearly the primitive viewpoint. His impressions of our civilization when we finally understand them will probably bring out many curious and interesting points. He will be able, moreover, to give us, from the primitive standpoint, information about a little-known chapter of history.

From time to time reports come in of evidence pointing to Indians who are still hiding away in the mountains east of the Sacramento. It is very hard in many cases to say just what the basis of these reports is. It is not absolutely impossible that there are one or more members of the Yahi group still wandering about in the wilderness. Let us hope that if there are any others of this group still alive we may ultimately succeed in bringing all of them together.