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## LOST AND FOUND

*Fish have long been recognized as having once comprised a particularly critical resource for native groups in many areas of California, and the various techniques employed in their extraction—whether from the ocean, rivers and streams, or lakes—were often both sophisticated and effective. The first account presented here (perhaps half of which is from previously published sources) provides a wealth of significant data, both old and new, on the construction and use of fish weirs in catching salmon in some of the state's major rivers. Parenthetically, it should be noted that the weirs described by Ringgold and Bidwell on the Sacramento River were entirely different structures, and were actually separated by some miles. The author and compiler, David R. Leeper, came to California during the gold rush, and later recounted his adventures and observations in The Argonauts of 'Forty-Nine (1894). The article reprinted here was originally published in The American Archaeologist [Volume 2, Part 9, Sept. 1898, pp. 227–230.] Leeper also contributed a number of other short articles on California Indians to The American Archaeologist and its predecessor The Antiquarian.*

*The second account adds some additional historical context to the familiar story of the Lone Woman of San Nicholas, and makes it clear that her presence on the island and some details of her life there were well known years before her 'recovery' by George Nidever in 1853. It originally appeared in Boston's Daily Atlas on March 27, 1847. I am indebted to Steven Schwartz of the Point Mugu Naval Air Station Environmental Division for bringing this to my attention*

### INDIAN FISHING CONTRIVANCES

The abundance of salmon and other fish in the streams of California and other parts of the northwest coast was one of the striking features of that land of big things. This food product—"the poor man's meat"—was the chief reliance of the natives located where this was available. Sun-dried upon their huts or upon scaffolds, the supply, in excess of the daily needs, was carefully packed, without salt, and preserved for use in winter. The weirs and other

contrivances of aboriginal skill for taking the fish were, in some instances, marvels of workmanship, considering the rudeness and simplicity of the people that designed and constructed them. A few facts in this connection may not be unacceptable to the readers of *The Archaeologist*, even though these facts be not all given at first hand.

George Gibbs, in his "Journal of the Expedition of Col. Reddie McKee, United States Indian Agent, through northwestern California, in the summer and fall of 1851," describes one of these fish-weirs, which he saw on the Klamath river, about two miles above its junction with the Trinity. The location was just opposite a large Indian village known as Hai-am-mu. "It crossed the entire river," says the writer, "here about 75 yards wide, elbowing up stream in the deepest part. It was built by first driving stout posts into the bed of the river at a distance of some two feet apart, having a moderate slope, and supported from below at intervals of 10 or 12 feet, by two braces; the one coming to the surface of the water, the other reaching to the string-pieces. These last were heavy spars, about 30 feet in length, and were secured to each post by withes. The whole dam was faced with twigs, carefully peeled, and placed so close together as to prevent the fish from passing up. The top at this stage of the water was two or three feet above the surface. The labor of constructing this work must, with the few and insufficient tools of the Indians, have been immense. Slight scaffolds were built out below it, from which the fish were taken in scoop-nets; they also employ drag-nets or spear them, the spear having the barb moveable, and fastened to the shaft with a string, in order to afford the salmon play. Similar dams to this exist on the Klamath, a few miles below the forks, and about 15 miles above this one, and there is another on the Trinity, 13 or 14 miles above its mouth. They form a frequent cause of quarrel among the bands inhabiting different parts of the river. Some understanding, however, seems to exist as to opening portions of them at times, to allow the passage of fish for the supply of those above."<sup>1</sup>

I was located on the Trinity at the time of which the writer speaks, and, through prospectors and packers, heard much of these works of native ingenuity. I also

saw one of the dams or weirs across the Trinity, a little above the mouth of the North Fork. This specimen was quite simple in construction. A row of stakes or pickets, supported at the upper end by a stringer, was thrown across the stream to obstruct the upward passage of fish. The fish were taken, so far as my observation extended, with the usual native spear, from the top of the stringer.

But perhaps the most elaborate and formidable of such fish-weirs of which we have any account, was the one on the Sacramento near the site of the present town of Colusa. Lieut. Cadwalader Ringgold, U. S. navy, of the Wilkes<sup>2</sup> exploring expedition, saw this structure in 1841, and described it as follows: "This fish-weir was constructed with great art. Stakes, pointing down the stream, had been driven into its bed, having three openings, which led into square pens above. Over each of the entrances into the pens was a platform, on which the natives stand to take the fish. On these also were heaps of ashes, indicating that the natives make use of fire to attract the fish."<sup>3</sup> The position was ascertained to be in latitude 39° 13' 39". The annexed cut, from a drawing by Dr. Charles Pickering, of the Ringgold party, represents the outlines of this weir.



Gen. Bidwell, at my request, has furnished the following interesting additional information respecting this wonderful piece of "Digger" contrivance:

Near Prattville, Plumas Co., Cal., Aug. 19, 1897.

Hon. D. R. Leeper, South Bend, Ind.:

My Dear Sir: Your esteemed favor of the 5th inst. has overtaken me. We—my wife, with two or three helpers—left Chico the 5th instant on our summer outing, roving somewhat, sleeping in tents, etc. We are literally in the depths of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Our next move will land us about 25 miles from any post office. But this is no answer to your letter in regard to the fish-weir on the Sacramento river.

It was a remarkable structure, considering the time when it was made, and by wild Indians unacquainted with any tool of iron or any art of civilization. Its exact location in relation to any town or landmark now existing on that river I cannot define, for it is long since I have passed that way. Colusa and Princeton are

well known towns on the west side of the Sacramento and about twelve miles apart. This weir was between them—possibly about midway—and I should say 18 to 20 miles below the mouth of Chico creek. The Sacramento river in those early days abounded in salmon, sturgeon, and other fish. These constituted their principal food supply.

In about 1826—about 15 years before I came to California, as nearly as I could learn from the Indians and other sources—the smallpox largely depopulated the Sacramento valley of Indians. But whether it prevailed less up and down the river where the fish-weir was, or the tenants of the villages had congregated more in that vicinity, I do not know. Whatever the cause, however, may have been, that section had more Indians—had larger and more villages in a limited section of country than any other part of the valley. The Indians there were adepts at making nets, which they did from twine and cords their women twisted by hand. These were made from what white people used to call "Indian hemp," which was a kind of milkweed that grew abundantly in marshy places. Where the fish-weir in question was located the river was wide—not less than 400 to 500 feet wide I think—but not deep, that is to say, less deep on account of the greater width of the stream. The depth of the water in summer I should say was quite uniform, and would average three feet or nearly so. In winter and times of floods the river must have risen a good deal, but much less probably than other places by reason of the spread of the stream and the freer flow of the water over the wide sandy shallow.

The weir was constructed mostly of willow poles of various sizes and lengths. The largest were burned in two so as to secure the required length and to point the end—that is, as much as they could by burning—so that it could be worked down into the sandy river bottom far enough to hold it fast against the current which was free at that place, but not rapid. The weir, when constructed, had openings between the sections three to six or more feet where nets were set to catch the fish.

There were two rows of the posts I think. They went entirely across the stream, and stood about six feet (or 8 perhaps) apart. Tall poles were lashed firmly along the tops. Other poles 8 or 9 feet long were fastened across on top so as to form a complete bridge for men to walk on entirely across the river. In 1843 the Indians a little lower down on the river were said to be hostile—reported to have shot arrows at immigrants coming from Oregon. Sutter sent men to punish them. I did not go on that outrageous campaign. But some of the men who did go told me that they left their horses on the east side of the river and crossed over on the fish-weir which formed a bridge wide enough for six men to walk abreast.

At that date I think there must have been 2500 to 3000 Indians along the river within ten miles above

and below the fish-weir. The largest village was the Colus (on the site of the present town of Colusa), which in 1844 I estimated to have had 1200 people. The village nearest the fish-weir was, I think, the Dac Dac.

Yours very sincerely, JOHN BIDWELL

P.S. I should have said that the Indians used grapevines to lash their poles together possibly in some places cords of wild hemp.

According to Dr. J. D. B. Stillman, who, in August, 1849, journeyed up the Sacramento by boat as far as Red Bluff, this dam or weir was still standing at that time, attesting its great strength to have resisted the annual freshets so many years. The doctor thus speaks of the structure: "This is a strong dam, made of poles planted upright, and bound together with withes,"<sup>4</sup> adding that it was the same that was described in "Wilkes." The Indians opened a place for the boat to pass through, as they had proffered to do for Lieut. Ringgold, but the latter faced about here, concluding from the river being "filled with rapids" at this point and for two or three miles above, covering the extent of his examination, that this was the head of navigation.

Something has been said of the spear or harpoon used by the savages for taking fish. This ingenious device merits further mention. Though the construction varied somewhat, yet the principle employed seems to have been in universal use among the Indians that fished on the streams west of the Rocky mountains. Of the many descriptions I have seen of this spear, I am tempted to quote that given by Peter Burnett in his "Recollections of An Old Pioneer," p. 120. Mr. Burnett crossed the plains to Oregon in 1843, and the process of fishing he describes he saw on that journey at Salmon Falls, Snake river: "This spear," he says, "consists of a strong, smooth pole, ten or twelve feet long and an inch and a half in diameter, made of hard, tough wood, on one end of which there is fastened a piece of sharp-pointed buckhorn about four inches long. The larger end of this piece of buckhorn is hollowed out to the depth of about three inches, and fastened on the end of the pole, which is tapered to fit into it. To the middle of this buckhorn there is securely fastened a thong or string of sinew, the other end of which is firmly attached to the pole about a foot above the buckhorn, leaving a considerable slack in the string. With this spear the fisherman lies down or sits close to one of these narrow channels, with the point

of his spear resting near where the fish must pass. In this position he remains motionless until he sees a fish slowly ascending the rapid current; when, with the quick motion of a juggler, he pushes his spear clear through the salmon before this powerful fish can dodge it. The buckhorn at once slips off the end of the pole, on the other side of the fish, the first flounce he makes, but he is securely held by the thong attached to the pole. No spear could be more skillfully designed or more effectually used than this."

This was the type of spear I saw on the Trinity in 1850-51; and I was not greatly surprised to see, as I did, in 1884, at the rapids of the Sacramento, just above Red Bluff, a number of white men fishing with precisely the same sort of spear, only that steel instead of buckhorn was used for the head; so superior was this contrivance thought to be to the rigid three to four tined spear of the white man.

D. R. LEEPER

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Reproduced from "Schoolcraft's Archives," Vol. III, p. 146. See also Bancroft's "Native Races," Vol. I, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Wilkes, who had charge of this expedition, had command of the frigate San Jacinto in 1861, when the Confederate commissioners, Mason and Slidell, were forcibly taken from the British ship Trent.

<sup>3</sup>"United States Exploring Expedition," Vol. V, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup>"Seeking the Golden Fleece," Stillman, p. 133. Was the first Governor of California after it became a State.

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#### A FEMALE CRUSOE

Off the coast of Alta California, about two degrees distant, bearing nearly west from Point San Pedro, which is in the latitude of 33° 43' N., and longitude 118° 14' W., will be found a small island, called by the Spaniards Saint Nicholas. This island was formerly inhabited by an inoffensive, indolent race of Indians, who subsisted almost entirely upon fish, which they caught from the rocks, and mussels, which they found in the sands of the beach. They were a listless, quiet race of beings, who seldom had communication with others of the human family, and who had few wants and fewer cares.

About the year eighteen hundred and eighteen or twenty, the Russians, from their settlements at the North, landed on this island a party of Kodiak Indians, for the purpose of hunting the sea otter, which, at that period, abounded in those waters. This party remained on the island for more than two years; and were the means of sewing the seeds of disease and contention amongst its unsuspecting and unsophisticated inhabitants.

Some ten or twelve years after the departure of the Kodiaks, this tribe had become diminished to about twenty or thirty individuals, when the governor of the department of California sent over a small vessel and removed them to the main.

In the last boat, which was embarking with the last of this people (some six or eight perhaps in number), to convey them to the vessel, which was to carry them from the home of their nativity forever, was one of the tribe, small in stature, not far advanced in years, and his dusky mate, then in the bloom of life. The order had been given to shove from the shore; the oars had dipped in the wave, the boat was rising on the foaming surf, then breaking on the beach with awful roar, when with the impulse of the moment as it were, this young and blooming bride of the red man, the imprint of whose footstep had been the last left on the sands of her island home, waved an adieu to her chosen mate, plunged into the abyss, "strove through the surge," and, in another moment, stood alone on the shores of her native land. She turned, to give the last lingering look to her departing helpmate; and then, gathering around her from her flowing mantle, wet by the ocean wave, in an instant disappeared forever from the sight of her astonished and sorrowing companions.

The vessel weighed anchor, spread her canvas; and, in forty-eight hours, this remnant of the inhabitants of San Nicholas were landed on Point San Pedro, houseless and forlorn.

From that period to the present—if she be not dead, or has not left within the past eighteen months—has resided alone, on the Isle of San Nicholas, this female Crusoe, the monarch of all she surveys. She preferred to part even with her chosen mate, and sever every human tie that could be binding, rather than leave the home of her birth—that lonely little isle, that had been to her a world, which she cared not to exchange for the abode of civilized man, with all its promised luxuries.

Since our Crusoe became the sole monarch of the isle, San Nicholas has been visited perhaps ten or twelve different times, by different individuals; but there she has continued to be found, with none to dispute her right—alone, solitary and forsaken.

Her dress, or covering, is composed of the skins of small birds, which she kills with stones, and sews them together with a needle of bone and the light sinews of the hair seal, sometimes found dead amongst the rocks. Her only food is a shell fish, of the mussel species, with now and then a still smaller fish, which the surf sometimes throws on to the beach. She never remains long in one spot; but is constantly wandering around the shores of the island, sleeping, which she seldom does, in small caves and crevices in the rocks.

During the last few years, it has been very difficult to obtain any communication with her. At the approach of the white man she flees, as from an evil spirit; and the only way to detain her, is by running her down, as you would the wild goat of the mountain, or the young fawn of the plains.

Those who have seen her at the latest period, report that she appears to have lost all knowledge of language; that she makes only a wild noise, altogether inhuman; and, when taken and detained against her will, becomes frightened and restless; that the moment she is liberated, she darts off, and endeavors to secrete herself in the wild grass, or amongst the rocks which hang over the never ceasing surf.

Every endeavor has been made, and every inducement offered, by different individuals, to prevail upon her to leave the island, but in vain. The only home she appears to desire, is her own little isle. Her last hope, if she has any, is, to finish her journey alone. She has no wish now, to hear again the sweet music of speech. Its sounds are no longer music to her ear—and, as for civilized man, his tameness is shocking even to her dormant senses.

To all appearance, she is strong, healthy, and content to be alone. What can reconcile her to her lot, who can conjecture? Humanity may hope that contentment may continue to be hers, to the last hour; for she is destined to lie down and die alone, on the cold shore of her isolated home, with no one to administer to her last wants, and none to cover her cold body, when the spirit shall have left the clay.

But the story of our Crusoe's chosen mate, the companion of her early life, has yet to be told. He saw her for the last time, as we have stated, when she stood alone on the shores of her own isle; when the boat with himself and his companions was dashing through the wild surf, that broke in uninterrupted succession against the rocks which encircled the resting place of his fathers, and which he was then leaving forever. With the remnant of the family from San Nicholas, our hero was landed at San Pedro, and there left, with the others who had accompanied him, to find a home in that land of strangers.

San Pedro, it may be known, is a bleak, barren, bluff point, running out into the blue waters of the Pacific, on which no verdure is to be seen, and but one solitary abode of man, rising amidst the desolation which surrounds it. The Pueblo de los Angeles is situated ten leagues distant, with one farm house between the one on the point and those of the town. The mission of San Gabriel lies yet farther on, some three or four leagues; where, at that time, might be found perhaps three or four hundred converted Indians.

But our hero, as he may be called, never left the beach on which he was first landed. Alone and friendless, there he remained, an isolated being, till life ceased to animate his frame. True it is, that several times he was induced, and once or twice forced, to venture as far as

the Pueblo, and even the mission of San Gabriel; but he always, as soon as at liberty, returned and resumed his old station on the beach, or fixed himself on the rocks which hung around the Point. And there he might always be seen, a solitary outcast, as it were, and more constantly when the sun was going down, with his eyes gazing on that celestial orb as it sunk into the western horizon, a direction which he well knew pointed to the lost and but never forgotten home of his nativity.

With difficulty he sustained the wants of nature by fishing about the rocks, gathering mussels, and sometimes receiving a scanty pittance of corn from the house on the Point, or a few pence from a passing stranger.

He studiously avoided, as far as possible, all intercourse with his fellow-man, and sought to live and die in solitude; and so did he continue to live a life which manifestly appeared a burthen to him, till one morning, as the sun rose, not two years past, his body was found on the beach a stiffened corse, stretched out, and bleaching, as it were, in the white foam of the surf, which was thrown about his lifeless remains as the mighty wave broke on the shore.

It is presumed his death was accidental—that while searching for shell-fish, in the night, amongst the cliffs, he must have fallen from an eminence, and thus terminated his solitary existence.

