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Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bc636q0>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 31(2)

ISSN

0191-3557

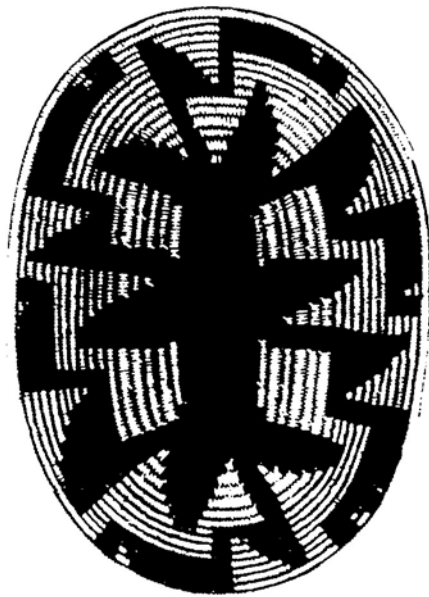
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Publication Date

2011

Peer reviewed



LOST AND FOUND

The following sympathetic and remarkably balanced account of the events that embroiled the settlers and Native Americans living in the San Joaquin Valley in a series of armed confrontations in 1856 originally appeared in The Overland Monthly in 1884 (Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 46–53). Although the author, George W. Stewart, was not born until 1857, a year after the events that he describes, his long involvement in the community as editor of the Visalia newspaper furnished him with an opportunity to compile a great deal of factual information on the topic from a wide variety of local sources while simultaneously maintaining a certain degree of objectivity. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the kinds of misunderstandings and cultural biases that Stewart describes here triggered actions that were tragically replicated in many other parts of the state. Stewart was clearly sympathetic toward the local Yokuts people, and wrote a number of papers on their beliefs and customs; he also had a deep interest in the natural resources of the region, and is perhaps best known today for his pivotal role in the creation of Sequoia National Park

THE INDIAN WAR ON TULE RIVER

George W. Stewart

It is impossible at this late day to determine the real causes that led to the war on Tule River in the spring of 1856, since the events were not noted in detail at the time, and but few of the prominent actors are now living; and, after the lapse of years, it is the most important items concerning troubles of this kind—the causes that led to them—that are soonest forgotten, only the more vivid pictures remaining distinct on memory's page. The Indians, of course, were credited at the time with the full blame of forcing the conflict; but there is much to lead to the belief that the exercise of a little moderation on the part of the white settlers would have prevented any great amount of bloodshed. Before entering upon the account of this war it may be of interest to make brief allusion to former Indian troubles, and to say a word concerning affairs prior to the outbreak.

Large numbers of Indians were living at that time about the eastern shore of Tulare Lake, and along the several streams issuing from the Sierra Nevada mountains—Kings River, Kaweah River, Tule River, Deer Creek, White River, Posa Creek, Kern River, and smaller streams. It was estimated that among the several tribes, speaking the same language with only the variance of an occasional word, there were in the neighborhood of two thousand warriors. Game and fish, upon which they subsisted principally, acorns, and the plants and roots and other articles that varied their diet, were plentiful; and before becoming acquainted with the fatal vices of civilized man, they were a healthy and contented people. Petty jealousies existed among the different tribes, and occasional ruptures occurred; but they were never so warlike nor so blood-thirsty as the large tribes farther east, that have maintained the struggle against civilization since the advent of the first white man among them. The first hunters and trappers who entered the valley found the Indians hospitable and friendly. A few parties of white men, Fremont's exploring party among others, passed through the valley, but were not molested until they encountered the tribes farther north, who had had more intercourse with Americans.

The first blood was shed on the 13th of December, 1850, when a small party of settlers was cruelly massacred by the Kaweah Indians. This party, fifteen in number, was conducted by a Mr. Wood to a beautiful spot about six miles east of the present town of Visalia, on the bank of the Kaweah River, where they intended to form a settlement, and immediately began the construction of a house from the oak timber growing plentifully thereabouts. Shortly after their first dwelling was finished, the chief of the Kaweahs, an influential personage, known by the Spanish name "Francisco," visited these pioneer settlers accompanied by a number of armed followers, and gave them notice to depart within ten days, at the same time informing them that death would be the penalty for remaining longer. They consented to leave within the specified time, and secreted many of the articles they had brought with them, intending to return to the place at some future day. For some reason they were not prepared to leave until the eleventh day

after receiving their warning; and while the men were separated in the morning, gathering up their horses and making other necessary preparations for the start, a large force of Indians armed with bows and arrows fell upon them suddenly, and in a very short time killed eleven of their number. Two succeeded in making their escape, one of them, however, seriously wounded. The Indians then surrounded the house, where they found Wood and one other. Wood's companion was given a mark to hold for the savages to shoot at, but at the first fire his body was filled full of arrows. The leader of the little colony finding himself alone, sought refuge in the house and fired upon the Indians from the inside, killing seven before his ammunition was expended. After making an ineffectual attempt to gain entrance through the roof, the Indians forced the door and were faced by Wood, who fought bravely until overpowered. Holding a brief consultation, they determined to skin their captive alive as a punishment for having killed so many of their braves; and tying him to a tree nearby, performed the fiendish deed.

The reason for notifying Wood and his party to leave is not known. Had there been any natural feeling of hostility toward the white men, they would not have been allowed to remain long enough to erect a dwelling, nor is it likely that they would have been given so many days' grace to prepare for their departure. It is probable that their action was influenced by northern Indians, who were in constant communication with them, and felt less friendly toward the whites; and it is not improbable that some member of the party was responsible for the estrangement.

Shortly after this, General Patten arrived from Fort Miller with a detachment of United States troops, and began to build a fort near Woodville, the site of the unfortunate and unsuccessful attempt to make a settlement, but did not remain to complete it.

Settlers continued to arrive in small bodies from time to time, but there was no further difficulty with the Indians until four years later. The whites were generally disposed to be overbearing in their intercourse with the tribes among whom they settled, and a few trivial quarrels resulted in threats of extermination being made by the Indians, who greatly outnumbered the settlers, and naturally looked upon them as intruders. Lieutenant Nugent was sent from Fort Miller with a small force of

soldiers, and attacked the Indians near General Patten's unfinished fort, and brought them to terms. Only one Indian was killed in this skirmish, which lasted but a short time. Lieutenant Nugent remained in the vicinity several months, when he was recalled to Fort Miller.

A short time after the departure of the troops, threats were again heard from the Indians, and for several months affairs were in a very unsettled state. The Americans were prone to magnify the hostile actions of the Indians, but to forget their own. The Indians, also, were regarded as inferior beings, and treated as such; this they naturally resented, and became quite insolent. Private difficulties led to either side's espousing the cause of its friends, and affairs began to bear a most serious aspect.

The county of Tulare had been organized in the meantime, the town of Visalia established, and newly arrived settlers were scattered through the valley, engaged principally in the raising of cattle and hogs. The first penalty inflicted by law was the imposition of a fine of fifty deer-skins upon a young Indian, who had maliciously shot an arrow into an ox belonging to one of the settlers. The sentence was regarded as a just one by the Indians, who awaited with interest the judgment of the Court, and the fine was promptly paid. Shortly after, cattle running on the plains were found to have been shot with arrows, and three Indians supposed to be the offenders were taken by the whites (without legal process) and severely whipped, and warned that a repetition of the offense would result in the death of the guilty parties. It was not long before more cattle were shot, and the whites went to the chiefs of the tribe with their complaints. Two Indians were turned over to them; one of these in attempting to escape was shot, and the other feigned death and was afterward pardoned. These summary punishments did not have a tendency to pacify matters, but, on the contrary, had a diametrically opposite effect; and affairs continued in this effervescent state for a considerable time, gradually growing from bad to worse. A Mexican vaquero employed by an American cattle-owner was killed by Indians, and about the same time an Indian boy was shot a short distance east of Visalia. The demeanor of the Indians became more hostile, and several of the whites favored an immediate attack on the rancherias in the neighborhood, but others were strongly opposed to any such action. Both races becoming

mutually suspicious, preparations were quietly made for the worst. In the spring of 1856 a collision was considered to be inevitable, and not a few, particularly among the young men, were anxious for hostilities to commence. At this time a party of Americans attacked one of the rancherias under cover of darkness, and, without losing any of their own number, killed or wounded several of the Indians. This cowardly and reprehensible act received, as it merited, the condemnation of the people in the settlement.

A Government sub-agent visited the Indians for the purpose of restoring harmony, but he was too late; they would listen to no conciliatory terms, probably believing that he represented the views of only a minority of the settlers. Warriors from all the tribes between the Kaweah River and Fort Tejon now began to concentrate in the mountains on Tule River, and the old men, women, and children moved away from the valley, except a few that remained in the vicinity of Visalia and refused to join the hostiles. It was thought that there were a few Indians from the valley tribes to the north, but they did not come in large numbers from any point beyond the present limit of Tulare County.

The "opportunity" long wished for soon arrived. A report reached Visalia that five hundred head of cattle had been stolen from what is now Frazier Valley, and driven to the mountains; another report placed the number at one hundred, with the additional information that they had been recovered from the Indians by the owners; and later it was stated that the Indians took only one calf from a band of cattle. At that time the first report was most willingly believed to be the true one, and it was resolved to punish the marauders immediately. The movements of the hostile band were made known to the whites by the friendly Indians in the settlement, and a company of some fifty or sixty men, hastily gathered from all parts of the Four Creeks country, as this section was known, under command of Captain Demastus, started in pursuit of the Indians. The same day a party of nine mounted men followed the trail of a band of sixty Tejon Indians, who, they had been informed, were traveling southwards in the direction of White River.

Captain Demastus' company, who were looking for the larger body of Indians, after reaching Tule River continued up the north fork several miles, where columns of smoke arising in the distance discovered to them the

location of the camp. The command moved forward and found the Indians occupying a strong position, which, to their surprise, was well fortified. The location was admirably chosen, and the defenses would have done credit to an experienced military engineer. A line of breastworks from two to four feet high, composed of boulders and brush, extended a distance of eighty rods along the face of a hill at the head of a little cove or plain. Immediately in the front of the position the ground was rough and broken, but to reach it it was necessary to traverse the open plain mentioned, exposed to a fire from behind the fortification. At either end, and in the rear of the line of defenses, was a dense thicket of chaparral and scrub brush, extremely difficult to penetrate. This position was defended by a large force numbering in the neighborhood of seven hundred warriors, armed with bows and arrows. A few had pistols. Had they been well provided with firearms, all the white settlers in the valley could not have dislodged them. Demastus, confident of the superiority of his men, small as their numbers were, ordered an attack. A shower of arrows tipped with heads of flint and hard wood met his command as they neared the breastwork. The fire was returned, but with no appreciable effect, and realizing the strength of the Indian stronghold, and the inefficiency of his small force, Demastus retired about a mile and went into camp to await reinforcements.

The little party of nine men previously spoken of, on the trail of the Tejon Indians, kept in their saddles all day and night; and about daylight on the following morning, when near White River, a short distance above where the little village of Tailholt is now situated, heard the barking of a dog. This they rightly judged to come from the Tejon encampment, and, tying their horses, advanced cautiously on foot in the direction whence the sound proceeded. Discovering the camp, they succeeded in making their way to within fifty yards of it, when the dogs began barking and growling furiously. One of the Indians, painted and decked with feathers, stepped forward to a little knoll that commanded a view in all directions, to ascertain the cause of the alarm. There was no one in command of the whites, but John W. Williams, afterward city marshal of Visalia for several years, seemed to be the recognized leader, and directed the man nearest to him, who had a rifle, to shoot. He fired, and the Indian dropped dead. A charge was then made, and the

Americans rushed into the camp, firing rapidly at the Indians, who scattered precipitately, not knowing the number of their assailants. Five Indians were found dead, but none of the whites were injured. Not feeling strong enough to continue the pursuit in the wooded country they were in, or to remain where they were after daylight, they returned to their horses, and rode back to Tule River to join the larger party.

It was the supposition at the time that this party of Tejon Indians had been implicated in the cattle stealing in Frazier Valley, and had gone on a marauding expedition to White River to massacre the few Americans then living along the stream; but nothing was heard of them afterward, and as they had a few women with them, they were probably only returning home to their own tribe.

When the party of whites rejoined the command under Demastus, it was decided to dispatch Williams to Keysville, in the Kern River Valley, for assistance, it being impossible to accomplish anything against the strongly fortified position held by the Indians with the handful of men before it.

Williams set out immediately, going by way of Lynn's Valley, Posa Flat, and Greenhorn Mountain. At the first named place he changed horses, and William Lynn, after whom the valley was named, agreed to accompany him to where he had some men at work in the mountains, from which place the trail could be more rapidly followed. During their ride after dark, through a heavily timbered region where bears were plentiful, an incident occurred that is worthy of note. Both were on the lookout for bruin, and after riding a short distance into the forest heard a noise behind, and turning observed a large black animal following them. Lynn raised his gun to fire, but Williams, who was mounted on a fractious mustang, thought it was not advisable to shoot at the bear in such close quarters, in a narrow trail leading through a dense thicket, particularly at night, when it would have been impossible to make a sure aim. They hastened on, and the animal behind also quickened his steps, which they could hear indistinctly on the soft earth. William's horse became frightened and darted up the steep mountainside, but floundered back into the trail again. Soon they reached a small opening, and here they determined to try the effect of a shot at the brute, which followed them persistently. Lynn discharged a load of buckshot, and the bear fell at the first fire,

greatly to their relief, and they proceeded on their way not caring to learn whether it was dead or not.

Williams reached Keysville the next day, the miners along Kern River assembled, and a party of about sixty men consented to assist the Americans before the Indian camp on Tule River. Hastily arming themselves, they immediately set out by the way of Lynn's Valley, where they were joined by Lynn and a few others.

On the return the bear killed by Lynn was found, and proved to be a large black mule belonging to a settler in the valley below. The owner also was found, and received from the two men the sum of ninety dollars, which amount he had recently paid for the animal. It was a long time before the young men heard the last of it; the mere mention of "bear's oil" was sufficient to cause either one of them to stand treat, and before the joke wore out it had cost them in the neighborhood of five hundred dollars.

When the Keysville party reached the scene of action, the number of whites there had already been increased by scattering settlers who had arrived from all parts of the surrounding country. W.G. Poindexter, sheriff of Tulare County, was chosen commander, and with a force of one hundred and forty men made a second advance upon the Indians. The breastwork was attacked from the front, the Americans shielding themselves as well as the nature of the ground permitted, and pouring a continuous fire into the interstices through which the Indians were discharging their arrows. The Indians fought bravely, but their arrows proved to be comparatively harmless missiles; and every one that exposed any portion of his body became a target for a number of excellent marksmen. It was an impossibility to drive the Indians from their position by attacking them from the front without a charge, which was not deemed advisable then, and Poindexter did not consider his force strong enough to spare an effective number for a flank movement; besides, it was thought the arrows of the Indians would have been more effectual at short range in the brush than at the long distance they were compelled to fire in front. By attacking from either flank it is quite probable that some of the whites might have been killed, but this was the most feasible plan of dispersing the Indians, and it was supposed the expedition was undertaken for that purpose. During this attack two young Americans, Danielson and St. John by name, were severely wounded.

The former crawled quite near the breastwork, but was discovered by the Indians and became the mark for scores of arrows. Three or four men rushed forward and carried him from his perilous position. He was dangerously hurt, and for a time it was thought fatally; but he eventually recovered. One other young man, Thomas Falbert, was shot in the thigh by an arrow, but coolly broke it off and continued loading and firing his piece as if nothing had happened. These are the only whites known to have been injured. Some of the Indians were quite reckless, a few standing fearlessly before their fortification heedless of the leaden rain from the guns of the assaulting party. One of these, struck down by a bullet, raised himself with difficulty and fired at the whites until his last arrow was gone. He and two others were killed in front of the line; what execution was done behind the breastwork was not ascertained, but it must have been considerable. Failing to accomplish anything of importance by this attack, Poindexter ordered his command to fall back. The Indians left their position and followed them, yelling like fiends, and keeping up a steady fire with their bows and arrows; but as soon as they got clear of the brush on to the open ground a volley of bullets sent them back to their stronghold.

Sentries were posted during the night to prevent a surprise by the Indians, should they feel emboldened to make the attempt. It would not have been difficult to have thrown the camp into disorder by a sudden and vigorous charge, as a false alarm proved in the night; but the Indians considered themselves safer behind their defenses. One of the men who had passed beyond the lines unobserved was seen when returning by a sentry, who, supposing him to be an Indian, opened fire. The man lay close to the ground and escaped unhurt. The whole camp, however, was immediately in an uproar, all supposing the Indians were about to fall upon them, and not knowing from what point the expected attack would be made. Men picked up the wrong guns, knew not which way to turn, and several minutes passed before anything like order was restored. This was the effect of a total lack of discipline, and served as a good lesson.

The Americans remained at their rendezvous several days without making any effort in force against the Indians. It was realized that a charge would be necessary to dislodge them, and William Lynn, before spoken of, invented a padded armor impervious to the arrows, to

be worn by the van of the attacking party. This armor protected the vital parts, leaving only the face and limbs uncovered. About a dozen men were thus provided and were known as the “Petticoat” or “Cotton-bag brigade.” They were amongst the most fearless and intrepid young men in the camp, but presented anything but a warlike appearance in their ridiculous habiliments. As the sequel will show, they never had an opportunity of trying their armor in the proposed grand charge.

For several days, while awaiting further reinforcements, nothing of importance was attempted. Frequent skirmishes took place, but little was known of the results except that an occasional Indian was seen to fall dead or wounded. Small parties of whites also sought and destroyed the caches of provisions made by the Indians at different points about the foothills, as was their custom. There was little trouble in finding them, as they were usually made among the branches of the oak trees. A portion of the command returned to Visalia for a few days, and, while there, insisted that the Indians who had remained among the whites, and who had been disarmed, should leave the settlement forthwith. They had taken no part in the hostilities, and several of the leading citizens protested against the unnecessary measure. But they were Indians, and that was considered sufficient cause for driving them away. They were assisted by a few of the whites to remove to Kings River, until quieter times. Most of the Americans who had engaged in this war were young men, and to them the excitement of the times was only a source of enjoyment; and owing to the inferior weapons of the Indians, they were in no imminent danger of losing their lives. They would gladly have seen a war of extermination inaugurated, and would have forced the peaceable Indians to assume a hostile attitude, that they might have had an excuse for attacking them. While in the settlement it was proposed by them to surround a rancheria of non-combatant Indians—men, women, and children—in the night, and exterminate the last one of them: before their scheme was consummated, however, the Indians were notified of their intentions and decamped. It was thought advisable that a place of refuge be prepared for the people in the valley to resort to in case an attack should be made by the Indians while the men were “off to the war,” and the erection of a small fort was begun in the town of Visalia on the bank of Mill Creek; but it was never needed and never completed.

Small parties of men now began to arrive from the upper country; some of them coming from as far north as Merced and Mariposa. Companies arrived from Millerton and Coarse Gold Gulch, now included within the limits of Fresno County; those from the first-named place under command of Ira Stroud, those from the second commanded by John L. Hunt. There also arrived from Fort Miller a detachment of twenty-five soldiers under Captain Livingston, bringing with them a small howitzer for throwing shells into the Indian camp; and from Fort Tejon half as many mounted cavalry under the command of Alonzo Ridley, an Indian sub-agent. When all of these had congregated at the rendezvous on Tule River, the total strength of the force was about four hundred, and comprised nearly all of the able-bodied men in the valley. Captain Livingston assumed the chief command. The citizen volunteers were armed with every style of firearm known, each one providing his own accoutrements. They were not well organized or drilled, of course, but what they lacked in discipline was made up in marksmanship, all being familiar with the use of firearms.

After all had reached camp a consultation was held, and it was agreed to divide the command into four divisions, and attack the Indians at daybreak the following morning from the front, rear, and both flanks, and thus hem in and annihilate the entire force if possible. Parties were sent out to view the country, that the several divisions might be guided to their respective positions during the night without confusion or loss of time: and Captain Livingston with his soldiers and about sixty volunteers ascended an eminence commanding the Indian fortification from the side, to select the most advantageous position for mounting their howitzer, that all might be in readiness for the battle on the morrow. The Indians unexpectedly made a vigorous attack on this party, forcing them to a fight, and thus precipitating the engagement. Livingston ordered a charge, and with his officers led the men in. They forced their way through the brush, at the same time firing upon the Indians, who, not having their breastworks to shield them, fled from their strong position into the mountains among the pine forests, where they had left their women and children. The Americans continued the pursuit two or three days, but failing to discover another camp or any large body of Indians, retired to the valley. After the Indians had been driven from their position several dead braves were

found inside the fortification, and there was evidence of many having been borne off through the brush. Nothing definite is known of the loss they sustained, but it was estimated that from the breaking out of hostilities up to this, the last real engagement, the total number of killed and wounded was not far from one hundred. No whites were killed during the charge, and none seriously injured.

The little army now broke up, and small detachments were posted at intervals along the edge of the foothills, to prevent the Indians from descending into the valley: the major portion returned to their homes. Notwithstanding the blockade, small parties of mounted Indians succeeded in reaching the plains at night, and did a considerable amount of damage. Most of the cattle had been driven in near the settlement, where they were closely herded and guarded; but the Indians succeeded in killing or driving off quite a number. They also burned a few houses in the foothills, and all but one along Tule River and Deer Creek—thirteen in number—their owners having deserted them for the time being. The only one on Tule River that escaped destruction was occupied by John Williams, and was constantly guarded. One night, while himself on guard, he observed two mounted Indians riding toward a cow that was feeding near the house. Wakening one of the three young men who were with him that night, that the Indians might be confronted by an equal number, he awaited their nearer approach. When the Indians were within range both advanced toward them and fired; and they scampered off without their expected booty, not stopping to return the fire until they had placed a quarter of a mile between them and the house, when a single pistol shot and a yell of defiance were sent back. The following morning one of their horses was found dead a short distance off, having been ridden apparently until it fell.

These night raids were continued for several weeks, until William Campbell, the sub-agent at Kings River, sought the Indians out in the mountains and found them willing to come to terms. The war had lasted six weeks, when the Indians returned to the valley, and they have remained friendly from that time to the present day; although, a little more than a decade later, a few murders committed on Tule River caused the government to send a company of troops from San Francisco, and force the Indians of that section on to a reservation set apart for them. There was no difficulty with them collectively,

however, and their liberties are in no way more restricted than those of other tribes. Throughout the valley their numbers are rapidly decreasing, only a handful now remaining to preserve the language and traditions of a once numerous and happy people.

Thus ended the Tule River war of 1856; a war that might have been prevented had there been an honest

desire on the part of the white settlers to do so, and one that brought little glory to those who participated therein. The responsibility cannot now be fixed where it properly belongs. Possibly the Indians were to blame. Certainly the whites were not blameless; and it is too seldom, indeed, that they have been, in the many struggles with the aboriginal inhabitants of this continent.

