

Book Reviews of *Modoc, The Tribe That Wouldn't Die* by Cheewa James

From the September 09, 2008 issue of High Country News

With song and prayer, soil and prairie grass, Native American author Cheewa James recently honored the memory of her long-lost great-great uncle. Frank Modoc left his Oklahoma reservation for a Quaker seminary over 120 years ago, fell victim to tuberculosis and never returned. While researching her tribe's history, James discovered the location of his burial site in Portland, Maine. She journeyed from her Sacramento, Calif., home to the grave, where she sprinkled earth and grass taken from the grave of Modoc's son in Oklahoma.

James, 69, a Modoc Indian and member of one of the three tribes comprising Southern Oregon's Klamath Tribes, is an author and corporate trainer. She's worked as a park ranger, talk show host, news anchor and producer. Now, the petite grandmother has taken on the task of helping to heal the wounds of a 130-year-old war, as well as the wounds of a battered planet.

Born on the Klamath Reservation, James grew up in Taos, N.M. Her father, Clyde, was the first American Indian pro basketball player. Her mother, Luella, who was of German ancestry, collected Modoc documents and photos and instilled a love of history into her daughter, who has compiled the tribe's definitive chronicle.

James' new book, *Modoc: The Tribe That Wouldn't Die* draws on a wealth of historical research, including Luella's papers. It also includes the previously unpublished accounts of U.S. Army soldiers who battled a tiny band of Modocs during the devastating Modoc War in Northern California. (James' great-grandfather, Shacknasty Jim, fought in that war.) The book interweaves straightforward history with historically accurate fictional vignettes, telling the stories of both sides.

Like most conflicts between Indians and non-Indians, the 1872-'73 war was fought over land use. "Modocs, as with many Native groups, did not see the land as something to be owned, any more than they saw owning the clouds or air or water," says James.

But the new settlers saw things differently. "Both the land and its inhabitants will ultimately suffer," James notes, "any time that land simply for the sake of possession overrides the preservation and best interest of the land and its resources."

After years of conflict, a reservation was established in the Klamath Valley for Modoc, Klamath and Yahooskin Indians. Soon, the more numerous Klamath began harassing their traditional rivals, the Modoc. Disgusted by the lack of response from

the reservation's superintendent, Modoc leader Captain Jack led his small band back to the Lost River area along the Oregon-California border.

The subsequent war between Jack's band of just 55 warriors and more than 1,000 U.S. Army troops cost 100 lives and over \$500,000 in 1870-era dollars. It also marked the only time that American Indians were executed for war crimes. News of the hangings reverberated throughout Indian Country, and the breakaway Modoc band was subsequently exiled to far Oklahoma.

James dug deep to discern the war's underlying causes. "I felt that so many questions have never been thoroughly answered: why the war started and who was responsible, the overlooked role of women in the war, and what had happened to the Modocs following the war," she says. Her job at Lava Beds National Monument in Northern California, where Captain Jack's band held off the Army for nearly a year, provided personal perspective. "I know the Stronghold (the natural lava fortress that the Modocs used during the war) intimately, and have walked the battlefields and war sites," she says.

James also introduces us to never-before-heard voices: "Lt. Harry De Witt Moore's letters, written during the war, were poignant and moving, in addition to providing incredible new information."

The crux of the book is the human cost of war. "There was no 'good' or 'bad' side (to the war)," says James. "All the individuals involved in it suffered -- Modocs, military men and settlers."

James hopes that a true understanding of her tribe and its history will help in another way: by bringing people together to heal the environment. "The core values of the Indian cultures of the West are important to preserve," says James. "They are the voices of the past, our national conscience that nags at us and begs us to remember how to live in accord with the earth."

To resolve environmental concerns, we must listen to all the voices that can provide insight, she says. And strengthening the oftentimes fragile ties between Indian and non-Indian groups is crucial. "Just as it is critical to move rapidly to do what we can to stabilize our environment," says James, "so, too, has the time come to learn, negotiate, and respect diverse opinions. ... If we do not call on the intellect, experience, education, and commitment of each individual, as well as groups, none of us is going to be around in the future.

"We will soon be worrying about losing human beings, not polar bears."

Indian Voices - July 2009

135 Years after Modoc War, intense research and hidden letters reveal new truths

"I have fought a hundred battles, lived a hundred lives, shed a thousand tears, and now I am ready to tell what I have learned," says Modoc descendent and author Cheewa James upon completion of MODOC: The Tribe That Wouldn't Die (Naturegraph). The book represents over a decade of research and writing-the dogged determination and struggle of one woman to tell the story of her people.

The newly published MODOC: The Tribe That Wouldn't Die is a page-turner, "magnetic reading," as one reader put it. The story is a prototype of Native Americans across America. The book is based on America's most expensive Indian war. Fought 135 years ago, this almost unbelievable war pitted, by war's end, over 1,000 U. S. Army soldiers against 55 Modoc warriors.

The book has been selected by USA Book News as an Award-Winner Finalist in the Native American Books category of the National Best Books 2008 Awards. It was awarded Honorable Mention in the 2008 London, England, Book Festival Awards, one of fourteen non-fiction books honored. The book was also one of four books awarded Honorable Mention in the San Francisco Book Festival in the history category.

James, enrolled with the Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma and born on Oregon's Klamath Reservation, has created a unique and exciting book destined to become a classic in Native American literature. In a desperate, last-ditch effort in 1873 to cling to their ancestral lands, the Modoc Indians fought a massive sixmonth war. The military attempted to rout out the Modocs and their families from their natural fortification, which still exists today in the jagged, desolate terrain known as the Lava Beds National Monument, California. "The match for the Modoc Stronghold has not been built and never will be...It is the most impregnable fortress in the world," despaired Lt. Thomas Wright, who fought and eventually died in the war.

This war dominated the front pages of newspapers all over America. A brigadier general was killed. Military men dropped like flies and most soldiers never even saw an Indian, as elusive Modocs slipped through the tortuous lava, in and out of the Stronghold.

What is generally unknown is the equally astounding story of the Modocs as they were resettled as prisoners of war in Oklahoma Indian Territory following the war. To most people, the Modocs simply ceased to exist. But an Indian agent in 1874 said,

"The Modocs plow and sow and reap with the same resistant courage with which they fought."

James, now a professional speaker and television talent in Sacramento, California, says that for all their attempts to adjust to their new home and climate, the Modocs faced an opponent more deadly than any they encountered in the Modoc War. "I fought back tears through most of the account of how Modoc men, women, and children were helpless in the onslaught of consumption (tuberculosis). The most unbelievable part was why they did not receive medical service and medicine- the greed and disregard of one single Indian agent resulted in a terrible number of deaths," says James. "It is a miracle I am even here. So many Modocs did not live to have descendants."

James has penned the most comprehensive book ever written on this amazing tribe, covering Modoc ancestral times, the Modoc War, the exile to Oklahoma Indian Territory, and concludes with information and color photographs of Modocs today. The book is filled with accounts from U. S. soldiers and Modocs never before revealed. It has photographs never before published.

James states that, "This is not a 'Modoc book.' It is a story of Modocs, U.S. soldiers and settlers alike doing the gutsy, incredible things that war demands. For the first time, the role of Modoc women in the war has received the recognition it should."

Astounding finds came James' way: "I recovered letters from a relative's old trunk of Harry De Witt Moore, a young officer who exposes new truths related to the war. As he lay one night in the lava rocks covered only with a canvas tarp, he wondered why soldier or Indian was there at all- a senseless war. I wished I had been there to comfort him."

The richly documented and illustrated non-fiction book also contains 30 fictionalized vignettes. Cheewa says, "I wrote fiction, all drawn from actual historical events, because I want readers to feel the emotion of this historic event- the pain, the heroic actions, the evolutions. I want young people and families to get excited about history, and even seek their own ancestral roots."

James does indeed touch the heart and spirit as well as the mind and intellect. "The message in my book is distinct and unmistakable. We need to build an understanding of other people. Raise our children that way. Honor people as the human beings they are, regardless of race, gender, religion, and all the other walls and barriers."