

The 1855-1856 Oregon Indian War in Coos County, Oregon:



**Eyewitnesses and Storytellers,
March 27, 1855 – August 21, 1856**

Report by

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This is the documented, and nearly forgotten, story of the systematic “ethnic cleansing” of the Coos, Coquille, Chetco, Umpqua, and Rogue River watersheds of southwest Oregon during the 10-month period from October 1855 through July 1856.

Coos County had been created in December 1853, and Curry County was subsequently subdivided from Coos County in December 1855, during time described in this report. In August 1857, the Oregon State Constitution was written by representatives from the Territorial counties in existence at that time. In February 1859, Oregon became a State, and in April 1861, the first battle of the Civil War took place. These are not unrelated events, but they are rarely acknowledged and are poorly understood as a result. This report is an effort to provide a better understanding of the people and circumstances that were involved in the Oregon (or “Rogue River”) Indian War of 1855-1856, and to place them in better context to subsequent State and national histories.

This story is entirely told through the eyewitness accounts of more than three dozen participants and observers, and through the subsequent writings of three early historians; each of whom was alive at that time, personally interviewed many of the key people and local residents that were involved, and subsequently wrote books on these topics that remain standard references -- although nearly unknown -- to the present time.

These people are listed and briefly described in the pages following the Table of Contents and, by design, are largely focused on the perspectives of people and events centered at Fort Orford and in the Coos Bay and Coquille River basins. The listed “Speakers” are those individuals directly quoted in the text; whether from their own writings as diarists, journalists, and correspondents, or as credibly quoted by others. Speakers, with the exception of two children (one Indian), two women (white), and Tyee John, are all healthy, mostly literate, white men, mostly young and in their 20’s and 30’s: miners, soldiers, land claimants, and businessmen.

The story begins with the opening of regular postal service at Port Orford, connecting the region for the first time to the current events in San Francisco, Portland, and Fort Vancouver, and by mail and steamship transport to the rest of the world. Local people were no longer completely isolated, but were now privy to the latest news, popular songs, and gossip shared by the rest of the world. And, conversely, the rest of the world was now informed as to what was taking place in Coos County.

For reasons of narrative, credibility, and respect, I have attempted to let each character speak for themselves and to let us know what they are seeing and thinking at that time; my contribution has been to seek these people out, and then only let them speak in turn and one at a time. Readers who stumble over references to “didappers” and “Fayaway,” as I did, can now Google those terms in a few moments: an unprecedented luxury unavailable to past scholars. As a result of these considerations, I have kept parenthetical asides, footnotes, and personal text to an absolute minimum -- no need for me to distract readers from the words and thoughts of the actual participants and observers of these affairs. They want to tell their own story, and it’s a good one.

Bob Zybach
Cottage Grove, Oregon
May 15, 2012

Cover illustration is from Glisan (1874: 293) and depicts “Volunteers on the march.”

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Main Characters

Arrington, James M. Lookingglass Valley Donation Land Claim, "Minute Men" Private.
Augur, Christopher Colon. US Army Captain.

Bledsoe, Ralph. Captain, Southern Oregon Volunteer Militia.
Brown, Charley. Husband of Indian woman who negotiated release of Geisel family.
Buchanan, Robert C. US Army Lieutenant-Colonel.
Buoy, Laban. Captain, Southern Oregon Volunteer Militia.

Catching, Ephraim. Myrtle Point Donation Land Claim, Indian wife, Fort Kitchen.
Chadughilh, Tyee. "Washington Tom," Coquille leader, father of Coquelle Thompson.
Chance, William. Indian Subagent at Port Orford.
Chandler, James G. US Army Second Lieutenant.
Chash Yadilyi. Childhood name of Coquelle Thompson, meaning "make noise like a bird."
Cram, Thomas Jefferson. US Army Captain Chief Topographical Engineer, Pacific Dept.
Creighton, John. Captain, Port Orford Minute Men.
Curry, George Law. Governor of Oregon Territory, namesake of Curry County.

Dall, William Healey. Captain of the steamship Columbia.
Deady, Matthew Paul. Judge, Oregon Territory Supreme Court.
Dodge, Orvil Ovando. Indiana high school student, newspaper publisher, historian, gold miner.
Drew, Charles Stewart. Adjutant, southern Oregon militia.
Drew, Edwin P. Special Agent, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Umpqua District.
Dunbar, Robert W. US Customs Collector, Port Orford.

Enos. French-Canadian Indian War leader, hung at Battle Rock by vigilantes.
Evans, John, Dr., US Department of Interior Geologist.

Flournoy, Hoy Bernard. Flournoy Valley Donation Land Claim, namesake of Creek and Fort.

Gardener, Charles Kitchell. Surveyor General of Oregon Territory.
Giles, Daniel. Gold prospector.
Glisan, Rodney. US Army Doctor, Fort Orford.

Hall, David. Arago Donation Land Claim, Indian Sub-Agent.
Harris, William H. Captain, Coos Bay volunteer militia, founder Empire City.
Harry, John Alva. Myrtle Point Donation Land Claim.
Hathorn, Dennis. US General Land Office Surveyor.

Jackson, General. See: Yaksan.
Jenny, Chetco. Indian translator and negotiator for Benjamin Wright.
John, Tyee. War leader of the Rogue River Indians.
Jones, Delancy Floyd. US Army Captain

Kannasket. Muckleshoot war leader.

Kautz, Augustus Valentine. US Army Lieutenant, Commander of Fort Orford.

Lamerick, John K. General, Oregon Volunteer Army.

Lane, Joseph. Governor, Oregon Territory.

Lockhart, Esther M. Empire City Donation Land Claimant, wife and mother of two.

Lupton, James A. Major, Oregon militia, deceased.

Manypenny, George W. Honorable, Commissioner Indian Affairs, Washington D.C.

Martin, William J. Major, Oregon Northern Battalion volunteers.

Meservy, Elisha. Captain, Port Orford Minute Men volunteers.

Nesmith, James Willis. Colonel, Oregon Mounted Volunteers.

Ord, Edward Otho Cresap. US Army Captain.

Packwood, William. Captain, Coquille Minute Men, Fort Kitchen commander.

Palmer, Joel. Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Oregon Territory.

Parrish, Josiah Lamberson. Reverend, Methodist Missionary, Indian Agent.

Paull, John. Klickitat leader.

Reynolds, John Fulton. US Army Brevet-Major, Fort Orford.

Riley, Michael. Sheriff, Curry County.

Robbins, Harvey. Captain Volunteer Army.

Rowland, William. South Fork Coquille Donation Land Claim, Indian wife, Fort Roland.

Smith, Andrew Jackson. US Army Captain, Commander of Fort Lane.

Stoneman, George. US Army Lieutenant.

Sutton, James M. Private, Oregon Volunteers

Thompson, Coquelle. See: Chash Yadilyi, born ca. 1848, son of Chadughilh.

Tichenor, William. Sea Captain, founder of Port Orford, Fort Point.

Tichenor, Ellen. Daughter of William, born September 10, 1848.

Tom, Washington. See: Chadughilh.

Victor, Frances Fuller. Nebraska homesteader, writer, historian.

Walling, Arthur G. Southern Oregon businessman, publisher, historian.

Washington, George. See: Chadughilh.

Wells, William Vincent. Traveling journalist, newspaper editor.

Wool, John Ellis. General US Army, Commander of Pacific Division.

Wright, Benjamin. US Indian Sub-Agent, Port Orford.

Yaksan, Tye. "General Jackson," a Coquille leader.

Yoakum, John. Empire City Donation Land Claim, namesake of Hill and Point.

Zieber, John Shunk. Surveyor General of Oregon Territory.

SPEAKERS

Children

Ellen Tichenor
Chash Yadilyi

School Teacher

Esther Lockhart

Journalist

William V. Wells

Historians

Orvil Dodge
Lewis McArthur
Frances Fuller Victor
A. G. Walling

Geologist

Dr. John Evans

Land Surveyors

C. K. Gardener
Dennis Hathorn
John Zieber

Prospectors

Charley Brown
Daniel Giles

US Customs Collector

Robert W. Dunbar

County Sherriff

Mike Riley

Politicians

Governor George Curry
Judge Matthew Deady
Representative William Tichenor

Indian Agents

Subagent Bill Chance
Subagent Edwin Drew
Major Joel Palmer
Reverend Josiah Parrish
Captain Benjamin Wright

Indians

Tyee John
Kannasket

US Army

Colonel Robert Buchanan
Lieutenant James Chandler
Captain Thomas Cram
Dr. Rodney Glisan
Captain Edward Ord
Captain Andrew Smith
General John Wool

Volunteer Army

Captain Ralf Bledsoe
Captain Laban Buoy
Captain John Creighton
Adjutant Charles Drew
Captain William Harris
General John Lamerick
Major William Martin
Captain Elisha Meservy
Colonel James Nesmith
Captain William Packwood
Private Harvey Robbins
Private James Sutton

Sources of Information

Archival Documents

National Archives (Hathorn 1855)
Smithsonian Institute (Evans 1856)

Books

“Journal of Army Life” (Glisan 1855-1856; Kannasket 1856)
“Coquette Thompson, Athapaskan Witness” (Chash Yadilyi 1855-1856)
“An Account of the Indian War in Oregon” (C. Drew 1855-1856)

Magazines

Harper’s Monthly

“Soldiering in Oregon” (Ord 1856; Brown 1856)
“Wildlife of Oregon” (Wells 1855-1856)

Oregon Historical Quarterly

“Oregon Conditions in the Fifties” (Zieber 1856)
“Journal of Rogue River War, 1855” (Robbins 1855)

Government Reports

General Land Office Survey Contract No. 57 (Gardener 1855; Hathorn 1855)
Topographical Memoirs (Cram 1855-1856)
1893 US Senate Ex. Doc. No. 25 (Palmer 1855-1856; Buchanan 1856; Chandler 1856; E. Drew 1856; Dunbar 1856; Wright 1855-1856)

Regional Histories

“History of Southwest Oregon” (Walling 1884; Deady 1853; John 1856; Martin 1855; Nesmith 1853; Smith 1856)
“History of Indian Wars in Oregon” (Victor 1893; Buoy 1856; Creighton 1856; Curry 1856; Hall 1855; Harris 1856; Meservy 1858; Packwood 1856; W. Tichenor)
“History of Coos and Curry Counties” (Dodge 1898; Chance 1855-1856; Eckhart 1854-1856; Giles 1854; Riley 1856; E. Tichenor 1855-1856)
“Oregon Geographic Names” (McArthur 1982)