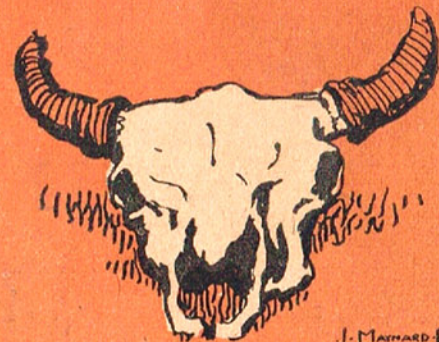


# Overland Monthly

Edited by Rounseville Wildman.



February, 1896



J. MATHARD DIXON

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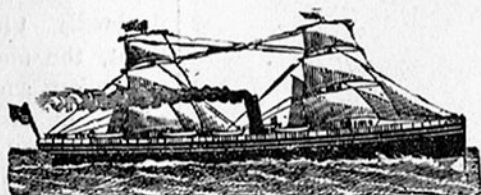
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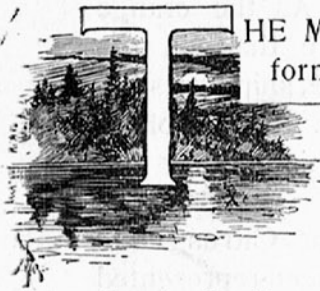
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## THE MECHOOPDAS,

### OR RANCHO CHICO INDIANS.



THE Mechoopdas, like all California Indians, with scarcely an exception, took their name from their village, — for there are no tribal names or relations in California in the usual acceptance of that term. Each village has its own chief, and chief and village are perfectly independent of every other village and chief, the only suggestion of tribal relations being that certain sections of country spoke the same or nearly the same language. The tongue of the Mechoopdas was that spoken by the Indians on the Sacramento River from the American River on the south to Chico Creek on the north, a distance of nearly one hundred miles. The language of the Indians along both margins of the Sacramento River was the same, extending westward into the Coast Range Mountains. It may be said that for every one hundred miles or less a different language prevailed. The names of some of the villages have become historic in our State, by giving names to rivers, as the Mokelumne, Tuolumne, Cosumne, to some towns, as Colusa, and to Shasta.

Indian names are generally expressive and euphonious, but usually carelessly or ignorantly pronounced by early white settlers. For instance, the Indians on Butte Creek call their village Nemsawin, corrupted into Nimshew; another, Sulamsawin, into Sulamshew; Kensawin, into KimsheW,—sawin meaning stream.

In this spirit of liberty the term “Digger” has been imposed upon all California Indians,—including the Mechoopdas,—a name odious to the Indians and senseless. My husband says that when he came to California, in 1841, the name was unknown, nor did he hear it among the trappers whom he met in the Rocky Mountains; nor until some years later, when a class of low white men, who were in the habit of shooting Indians for any trifling cause, began to use it contemptuously for Californian and all other Indians. His inquiries at the time convinced him that it was a term of reproach used by the enemies of certain tribes, or branches of tribes, who lived in the Rocky Mountains and subsisted largely on roots, especially the camas root, and by a low class of white men who took their cue from these enemies. In this opinion he is supported by reliable ethnologists of the United States Geological Survey, among them Professor Henshaw, who has furnished me with the following:—

“Digger,” said by Powell to be the English translation of U-ai-Uu-iut, the name of a small tribe near St. George, southwest Utah, which early became known to the California immigrants. It was the only Pai-Ute tribe practising agriculture, hence the original significance of the term “Digger.” It seems more probable, however, that the term is merely a corruption of “dika” or “tika,” the terminal syllable of all band or tribal names among the Shoshoni. In time the name was applied to every tribe known to use roots extensively for food, and hence to be diggers. It thus included very many of the tribes of California, Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, and Arizona, tribes speaking widely different lan-

guages and embracing a number of distinct linguistic stocks. As the root eaters or root diggers were supposed to represent a low type of Indians, the term "Digger" speedily became one of opprobrium and a synonym of all that is low and degraded. The name is devoid of significance as a tribal name, and should never be used.

Yet the name has become so identified with the Indians of California particularly, as to have become incorporated by the publishers in an article of my own on the Mechoopdas for their identification.

My husband thus describes the Mechoopdas, as seen by him in 1847:—

When I came to survey this and other ranchos in this part of California, the Indians were almost as wild as deer and wholly unclad, save that the women always wore a skirt-like covering divided at the side, made of tulé, a kind of rush, which was fastened to a belt or to handles thrust under the belt. I have never seen a woman, no matter how untidy or degraded, not thus clothed. When I began surveying, not having enough white men, I had to use Indians. In clearing away brush and brambles it became necessary to furnish them something in the way of clothing, including shoes, pantaloons, and shirts, which were often removed by them as soon as the work was done, and carried home to their village in their hands, to be brought back in the morning and worn while at work. And for many years afterward in stormy weather they took off their shoes, wearing them only while at work under shelter, as in mill or barn. But they soon learned to wear the clothes day and night until worn out. At the same time they became quite skillful in the use of soap and water in cleansing cotton garments. Men and women became expert in converting cotton goods into garments. It was a wonder to me how soon the women would have dresses after receiving a piece of calico. Goods distributed Saturday night would be made by Monday morning into pantaloons and shirts in really creditable imitation of ours.

My introduction to the Mechoopdas was on a May morning in 1868, when my husband escorted me through their village and over their dome-shaped house-tops, on which were seated groups of women, in aboriginal fashion, enjoying

the delicious spring morning. As we passed from one to another, friendly smiles and nods greeted us, while the chief, Tulamian was his name, slowly ejaculated in guttural tones, "*Hin-o-pe muhale, Hin-o-pe muhale*"—good woman, good woman.

This village at this time was about one hundred yards from the mansion, whither it had been removed by my husband for the better protection of the Indians from the lawless white element ever incident to new settlements. Originally it was adjacent to Rancho Chico. This village and its inhabitants fascinated me. The houses were principally earthen, the few frame ones being the result of my husband's persistent efforts to civilize them. The earthen ones were made by excavating the earth in circular form, and roofing it with a dome supported by saplings bound together and thatched with straw and grass and the excavated earth. A circular opening in the center of the dome served as chimney, ventilator, and door; a ladder of saplings, for stairs; a fagot fire, for cooking and heating. This dwelling served for all household purposes. I have seen comfortable bunks of saplings encircling the room.

The village was beautifully situated on Chico Creek, a lovely dashing mountain stream, in which the trout still linger, embowered with wild grape vines, sycamore, alders, and great oaks, whose generous branches spanned the stream. Many a night have I listened to peals of laughter as these dusky children of the forest plunged from the precipitous bank into its waters and splashed about by the hour; and have watched the women, as many hours more, gathered in groups along the bank on the lovely slope a little eastward, preparing their cuisine for a great feast or "Big Time." Here and there lazily curled the smoke from fagot fires on which smooth stones were heat-

## THE MECHOOPDAS.

ing wherewith to cook acorn soup and bread, and other luxuries. Shallow circular depressions, some two feet in diameter, were made in the sand for washing the acorn meal, to remove the bitter, astringent properties. The acorns after being dried were pulverized in stone mortars of rude construction with stone pestles, and put into these shallow cavities. Water was then repeatedly poured on till the bitterness was gone. Then with the finger the dough was marked into squares, lifted by one hand, and the adhering sand removed by a dexterous application of water with the other. It was then transferred to the heated stones on which fresh grass or leaves were hastily laid to receive it. Then another handful of grass on top of the dough, and hot stones upon that, until it was baked. My husband says they also made the dough into balls and put it into holes in the ground, previously heated, and added heated stones on top. The meal not made into bread was diluted with water and boiled into soup in large water-proof baskets of beautiful shape and ornamentation, made of grass roots, wild smilax, and certain shrubs. The stones were lifted from the fire with two long pointed sticks, dipped into a basket of water to remove the ashes, then dropped into the soup and on cooling returned to the fire. This was repeated until the soup was thoroughly boiled, bubbling like a mud geyser. The very aged still adhere to some of the old customs.

Another source of wonderment and pleasure was to watch the women threading their way along, single file, bare-footed, dressed in simple calico dresses, a kerchief on head, tied under chin. They moved along in a little gliding trot almost as if borne along by the breeze, so unlike the angular movements of civilization, and due doubtless in part to the elasticity of the bare untrammelled foot. They

often bore upon their shoulders immense baskets supported by a band around the forehead, and filled with fagots or larger wood gleaned from the forest, a most approved "bang" serving as cushion for protection from the strap. The weight of these burdens is astonishing. The women at this time were the burden bearers, and also sewed sacks in my husband's flouring mill, gathered garden seeds and small fruits, and gleaned for themselves in the harvest field, said gleanings commanding best price for seed wheat on account of its purity.

When a death occurred or was expected, the wailing was terrific, continuing from the time of death until burial, rising and falling as the exhausted ones withdrew and new voices were added. Even after the village had been removed nearly a mile, the pitiful wailing could still be heard all night. No change was made in the mourner's toilet until after the deceased's burial, when the hair, which, in the case of the women, had been filled with ashes during the mourning, was cut short and they went into retirement, to mourn until its usual length was restored. There were many interesting customs in connection with their burial and mourning which space forbids recording.

It was not until January, 1875, that my desire was accomplished to provide religious and educational privileges for this people, the children fleeing like deer if spoken to, and the women barricading by a friendly smile and persistent silence all approach to intercourse.

The thought being given me at this time of an industrial school through which they could become possessed of garments by the making thereof, I was enabled to secure their attendance by displaying the goods and by gestures and words signifying that they were theirs if they and their children would attend. The result was most satisfactory. The women, who had



ONE OF THE ANCIENTS.

done but the coarsest sewing, became almost as expert with the needle as a French seamstress. Even little girls made complete dresses. English was spoken only by the men, hence women and children had to be taught, pictures proving the most efficacious mode. The school was composed of women to the age of forty and boys and girls from six years and upward, all of whom were taught the rudiments of education. The rapidity with which these middle-aged women

learned to sew, read, and sing, was surprising, yet no conversation in English was indulged in by women or children for years after it was perfectly understood, unless forced from them. They chatted merrily in their own language, and the children often perpetrated innocent jokes upon me to the merriment of the rest; as for instance, calling me mother in "Indian" as they presented their work for inspection. No one not possessed of their confidence has an idea of their sense of

fun. Their native language is now literally fading out—the children speaking English entirely.

In course of time a most touching and irresistible appeal was made for a church of their own, and it resulted in a humble structure, located in their village. This soon proved too small, and a larger one was built in our grounds that they might enjoy the benefit of a lovely walnut grove. Of this church it has been my privilege to be pastor. Last spring it was deemed advisable to remove it to the village grounds and enlarge it with a tower and belfry (the upper room for the use of the Band). This so delighted the Indians that they asked to be allowed to buy a new and larger bell as more worthy the more pretentious building. The bell was bought and they also built an organ loft of most creditable appearance.

After some nine or ten years my failing health obliged the disbanding of the Industrial School, whereupon the Occidental Board of The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society assumed responsibility of a day school for about four years. On the discontinuance of this the children became pupils of the public schools, and later two entered the Training Department of the Chico State Normal School.

For a dozen or so years the Indians have had a brass band, at one time paying twelve dollars a week for instruction.

This year they decided on their first celebration of the Fourth of July, the thought and program wholly their own. An unexpected drenching rain on the Fourth disbanded their forming procession, adjourning it to the 5th. Not that rain has terrors for the Indian, but the red, white, and blue, were melting into disreputable disorder on banners, dresses, and decorations, a condition of affairs not in harmony with Indian dignity.

On going to the village the next morning to see the Goddess of Liberty en-

throned and the parade start, what was my surprise to see, already there, citizens of Chico in carriages, on bicycles, and on foot, intent on the same errand, transforming Indian avenue into a gay esplanade.

The procession was ready to start. Where was the Goddess! I found her,—a maiden of but thirteen years,—standing in her doorway dressed in white, a starry crown upon her head, a red, white, and blue sash draped from shoulder to side, a wand with patriotic streamers in her hand.

"Why are you not in your place, Maggie?" I asked.

"Are *all* the people in the wagon?" she quietly inquired.

"Yes, come."

"I am waiting to be taken," she replied with modest dignity.

Just then her father, the Chief in marshal's garb, arrived and the maiden Maggie stepped off with a grace, dignity, and maturity of manner bewildering to me.

A high throne had been built in the wagon, to which Maggie was conducted, women, children, and flowers, in profusion at her feet. Other wagons followed laden with Indians, resident and visiting. The brass band, and the marshals on horseback, presented a picture never to be forgotten. These very marshals were little unclad savages when my husband first saw them,—now decorated with silk sashes sent to them by prominent gentlemen of Chico with request that they wear them, which they did with the grace of cavaliers, for Indians are as graceful and as much at home on a horse as Spaniards.

The parade was to have extended merely to our home for purpose of serenade, and then return to the grove for patriotic exercises, but an earnest solicitation from responsible parties overcame their mod-

esty and extended it into Chico. And what a generous welcome was theirs!

"This is worth a lifetime of work," I exclaimed, as the beautiful parade and inspiring music passed to town, followed from the Indian village by ladies and gentlemen, whose merry nods and smiles announced that they were not ashamed to confess to enjoyment of the scene.

So like a phantom it seemed, disclosing itself among the trees, the gay colors and dusky skins, lovely Maggie's pure face, the glint of cymbals and horns, and the prance of horses, that my husband exclaimed after it had passed:—

"I have not half seen it! I don't feel I have seen it all!"

"Nor I," I replied, and in a twinkling the disappearing host was hailed and graciously returned, passing round and round until proven a blessed reality.

The Indians had prepared extensive seating capacity in the grove near their village for their white friends, and were not disappointed, many of the best and most intelligent of Chico's citizens doing them honor.

Nearly an hour intervened before the commencement of exercises. Where was the Goddess! All present but her! Investigation disclosed Maggie still seated on her throne, embowered in trees,—attendants, horses, all gone!

"Why, Maggie, what are you doing here? Why do you not come down?"

"I am waiting to be taken down," she patiently replied.

Presently her uncle approached, conducted her from her pinnacle to the grand stand, and seated her by her father. This stand was sacred to the band, marshals, and orators only, the children, excepting Maggie, being allowed thereon only while performing their part of program. When it became Maggie's duty to unite with the children in song she removed her crown, placed it by her father's side,



THE RISING GENERATION.

and stepped forward to lead the glad song of the little ones; but though her seat was resumed her crown was not.

"Tell Maggie to put her crown on, it is so becoming," said a lady to me.

"Maggie knows what she is doing," I replied, her delicacy and wisdom having humbled me to the position of learner, rather than teacher. Maggie had said to Miss Florence, my associate in this work since 1887, and devoted to it, that she thought it improper for her to sing with the children if Goddess of Liberty. These scruples Miss Florence overcame, but Maggie's sense of fitness led her to remove her crown.

The program consisted of prayer, music by band, hymns, patriotic songs, recitations by the children, reading of Declaration of Independence, and an oration by Mr. Dick Phillips, one of the middle-aged men, in which were words worthy the consideration of the thoughtful. An extract is the following:



Be men of principle ; be honorable ; be honest. Will my looks be before my honorable heart? If I was pretty as you are, ladies ; if I was pretty as the sun ; if I was the color of the tree ; if I was the color of the dirt ; as long as I have good principles and good feeling, every man equal on the globe. That is the thing, my dear brothers and sisters.

That is why I am here today to decorate this place, to give up my hard feelings. I laid my bow down today. I laid my weapons down today. I will shake hands with you today so that we can come together under the United States flag. . . .

His Son (Christ) made us all one and free man, and we must respect the people of the United States. Now if I say, "What are we going to do?" They say, "Far back,—we are so far back. What are we going to do? What is going to happen to us? White man got us all. The white man got his arm around us. He might squeeze us in two any time." Hold on, hold on, we are not dead yet. Do right by the people of each color. If you make trouble with any one, shake hands with every one.

Then give us liberty of having schools—the white man's government. Give me my education and I will be with you. Give me the privileges you give other colors, and put me alongside of you. What kind of man will I be if you come alongside of me? Are you ashamed of me? I am sure I am not ashamed of you.

In 1850 to 1865 I was in Petaluma. I remember when Abraham Lincoln was killed. I remember the white man say, "Great man dead." I do not know. He was a white man ; he was a good man. He was a man that we remember. He had a feeling for everybody. That is more than the colored man say. [He did not mean negro.]

Now all the people on this ground I will thank you for this great day we decorate.

We had a fine time today, my dear brothers and sisters.

All day a wonderful exhibit of Indian curios was displayed in the Chapel, including fine bear skins and other furs, varieties of food, wearing apparel, useful and ornamental, some so sacred as to have to be concealed from Indian women's eyes.

"We know these robes are only of feathers," said the guide, "but you can't convince the old women that if they should look upon them they would not see ghosts. They were taught it long ago. It is man's way of trying to appear superior. *Just like men!*" he added, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, "so we have to hide them when the old women come in."

But the *new* women smiled amiably upon the terrific masks, and long robes of curious workmanship, bristling with feathers hung to the end of feathers, coverings for the whole body, head and all.

The systematic arrangement of this grand display, and the explanation of it, was remarkable. A foot race with a silver watch from a Chico jeweler for prize, closed the day's sport. As the sun set in magnificent splendor, Mrs. Amelia S. Quinton, who had come to be our guest for the occasion, pronounced the closing scene one worthy the day.

At night an Indian dance was given in the Sweat House. "To show the old and the new, and the new is better," added one of the men.

I should like to, but must not now, tell of Christmas, with its Chapel decorations, and loads of gifts from white friends to Indian men, women, and children, and the many dainty little Indian baskets from the Indians to their white friends, and the wonderful cane of hand-woven horse hair,—sorrel, black, and white,—from the Chief to my husband ; and the grand program of prayer, hymns, Scripture, songs, recitations,—closing with a little episode of ventriloquism and legerdemain by one of the younger Indians, "For all like to laugh, old and young," he explained.

A. K. Bidwell.

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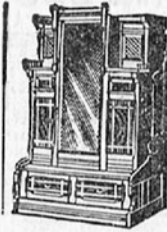
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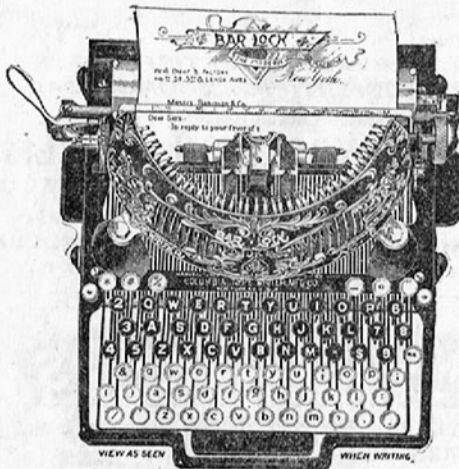
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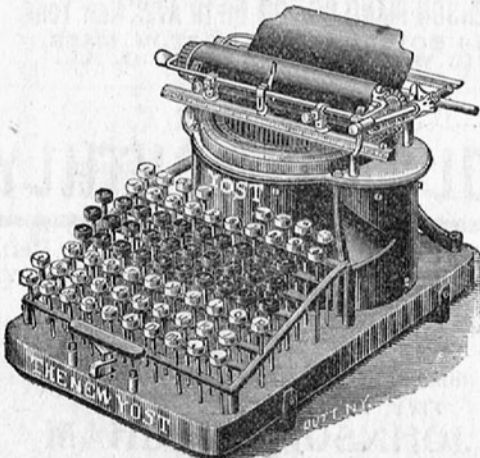
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