

Ben Wright Massacre of 1852

By William Thompson, Jeff Riddle

These two accounts of the same event, one written by a white pioneer, the other by the son of a Modoc woman and a white settler, serve as excellent examples of the difficulty historians encounter when working with written sources. Though both profess to have the same source, settler and interpreter Frank Riddle, they differ dramatically in their retelling of what came to be known as the Ben Wright massacre.

The first account was written by "Colonel" William Thompson, a white participant in the 1872-1873 war with the Modocs. He makes his bias clear in the chapter previous to the one reproduced here, disparaging the courage and physical appearance of the Modocs and referring to them as "ever the clear, relentless foe of the white man, murdering and pillaging without other pretext and without mercy." He portrays the Ben Wright massacre as an act of righteous self-defense against a pack of blood-thirsty savages intent on perpetrating their own massacre. According to Thompson, Wright and his men were only defending themselves.

The account of Jeff Riddle, the mixed-blood son of Toby and Frank Riddle, offers a very different interpretation of the events of November 1852, however. He frames the massacre as the final outrageous act of a murderous rampage by settlers on an "Indian hunting" expedition. According to Riddle, Wright set out to murder as many Modocs as he could, telling his men to spare no man or woman.

Both accounts agree that Ben Wright killed Captain Jack's father, a fact disputed by later historians, and neither mention the alleged plan to poison the Modocs with strychnine-laced food, which, according to some later accounts, was Wright's original intent. In the end, we will probably never know the exact details of what occurred on that bloody November morning.

Further Reading: Douthit, Nathan. "Between Indian and White Worlds on the Oregon-California Border, 1851-1857." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 100, 1999: 402-433.

Murray, Keith A. *The Modocs and Their War*. Norman, Okla., 1969.

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