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Kibbe's Campaign

by Steve Schoonover

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Kibbe's Campaign

By Steve Schoonover

We are pleased to be able to feature this interesting story researched and written by Steve Schoonover, Student of Yahi & Yana History, of Chico, California.

Fall was turning to winter in 1859 when General William Kibbe, commander of the state militia, finally secured a parley with a man he took to be the chief of all the "wild" Indians of northeastern California. Kibbe delivered a speech of remarkably weird reasoning, which unfortunately for the Indians, reflected the way most white men thought in that era.

We don't have his exact words, but a witness paraphrased the remarks for the *Red Bluff Beacon* newspaper:

There are good and bad white men, good and bad Indians, Kibbe said. Some whites treated Indians badly; some Indians would kill whites and steal their property. Therefore, Indians and white men could not live together. And therefore, Kibbe concluded, the Indians would have to leave.

This speech was delivered somewhere in the valley of the Pit River, an area that had been home to as many as 3,000 Achomawi and Atsugewi for thousands of years. There may have been a few dozen white men living in that valley in 1859, with the deepest roots going down a decade.

And yet, Kibbe believed in all sincerity that the Indians should leave their homes and make way for the white newcomers. And he had the force to press his opinion. Under his command were perhaps a hundred armed men who'd been roaming the foothills and mountains since August, seeking to "tame" the country for white families. In the weeks to come, they'd ply their trade, with a vengeance, along the Pit River.

Before they were done, about 200 Indians would be dead, and as many as another thousand would have been forced from their homes at gunpoint and taken to distant reservations.

Although it was the largest military campaign ever mounted in the territory between the Pit River and the Feather River, little is known about Kibbe's campaign.

Robert Anderson dismissed it with a few sentences in his book, *Fighting the Mill Creeks*, and Kibbe's own official report on the operation doesn't help, as it's long on platitudes and short on details - except for putting the cost at \$49,468.43. Ernest Neasham's book *Fall River Valley*, offers details on the later phase of the campaign, but no single source ties it all together.

The newspapers of the day, however, particularly the *Red Bluff Beacon* and the *Shasta Courier*, carried extensive reports, including the accounts of correspondents among the men in the force. These allow us to trace the course of the campaign, although the reports get thin when the blood begins to flow.

Kibbe's campaign came in reaction to the annual spring raids of the Yahi Indians against white settlers in Tehama County on the east side of the Sacramento River. For several years, the Indians had come down out of the hills beginning in March or April, to make off with livestock and other foodstuffs from white ranches. The raids began in the mid-1850s, and coincided with the development of water-driven flour mills on the Yahi creeks. The mill dams interrupted the spring salmon run. That was probably the most critical food resource to the Yahi, coming as it did at the end of the barren season of winter. The salmon meant strength for the weak, health for the sick. And then suddenly, the fish were gone, or at least, greatly depleted. It was probably desperation that sent the Yahi forth those spring nights, seeking meat on the hoof to make up for loss of meat on the fin.

As had been the case in the previous years, in 1859 white settlers responded with raids of retribution. The first abortive counterattack that year left the Sacramento Valley in early April, heading up the north bank of Mill Creek. Large numbers of Indians were seen on the south bank, but the creek was flooding, and an attack was not possible. Or so the retreating white men reported.

The residents petitioned Gov. John B. Weller to allow the formation of a company of volunteers to clean out the hills, but instead he persuaded the federal military commander in California, Gen. Newman S. Clarke, to send a company of regulars north to provide security. Capt. Franklin F. Flint arrived in Red Bluff on May 25

with Company A of the 6th Infantry. The troops promptly infuriated the locals by going into camp outside the city. Flint said his orders didn't allow offensive action.

Meanwhile the Indian "depredations" continued off and on into June. William Patrick was killed on June 24 along Payne's Creek, and ranches were raided east and south of the Inskip Hills (probably named for Dr. Inskip, a prominent resident in that area east of Red Bluff). Grain fields burned under suspicious circumstances along the foothills from Antelope Creek south to Rock Creek.

(Coincidentally, pioneer Peter Lassen and another man were killed in northwestern Nevada on April 29, probably by Northern Paiutes.)

Residents on the east side of the Sacramento River responded to the raids in their area by raising a fund to be dispersed in exchange for Indian scalps. An expedition was mounted under the command of John Breckenridge, and headed into the hills for a two-month-long scalp hunt. Robert Anderson was among the participants, and he reported the expedition in *Fighting the Mill Creeks*, although he failed to mention the details of the mission's funding.

Anderson said Breckenridge's force roamed through Yahí country without success, and then rambled north as far as the Pit River. They swept back south over the same ground, still without success. They kept going south until they located what was probably a Maidu Indian village near the current town of Forest Ranch. They attacked and killed one Mexican and about 15 Indians judging from newspaper reports at the time, although Anderson claims in his book that about 40 were killed.

Some of the Indian survivors appear to have fled north into Deer Creek canyon at this time, wounding some white men on the Cohasset Ridge along the way. The white war party followed the refugees north, found their new camp, and attacked it as well. About a dozen more were killed, and a number of women were taken prisoner.

Breckenridge turned in 29 scalps, "only three or four of them women or children," and presumably collected the money. Anderson probably needed his share, as Indian raiders had come down out of the hills while he was busy on the raid, and burned his barn, fences and crops.

While the Breckenridge party was roaming through the hills, the citizens of Tehama County continued to agitate the state and federal governments for a more official remedy against the Indians. Kibbe conducted a tour of the area, and in August, returned to Red Bluff

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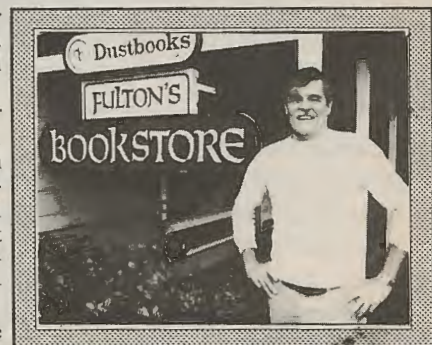
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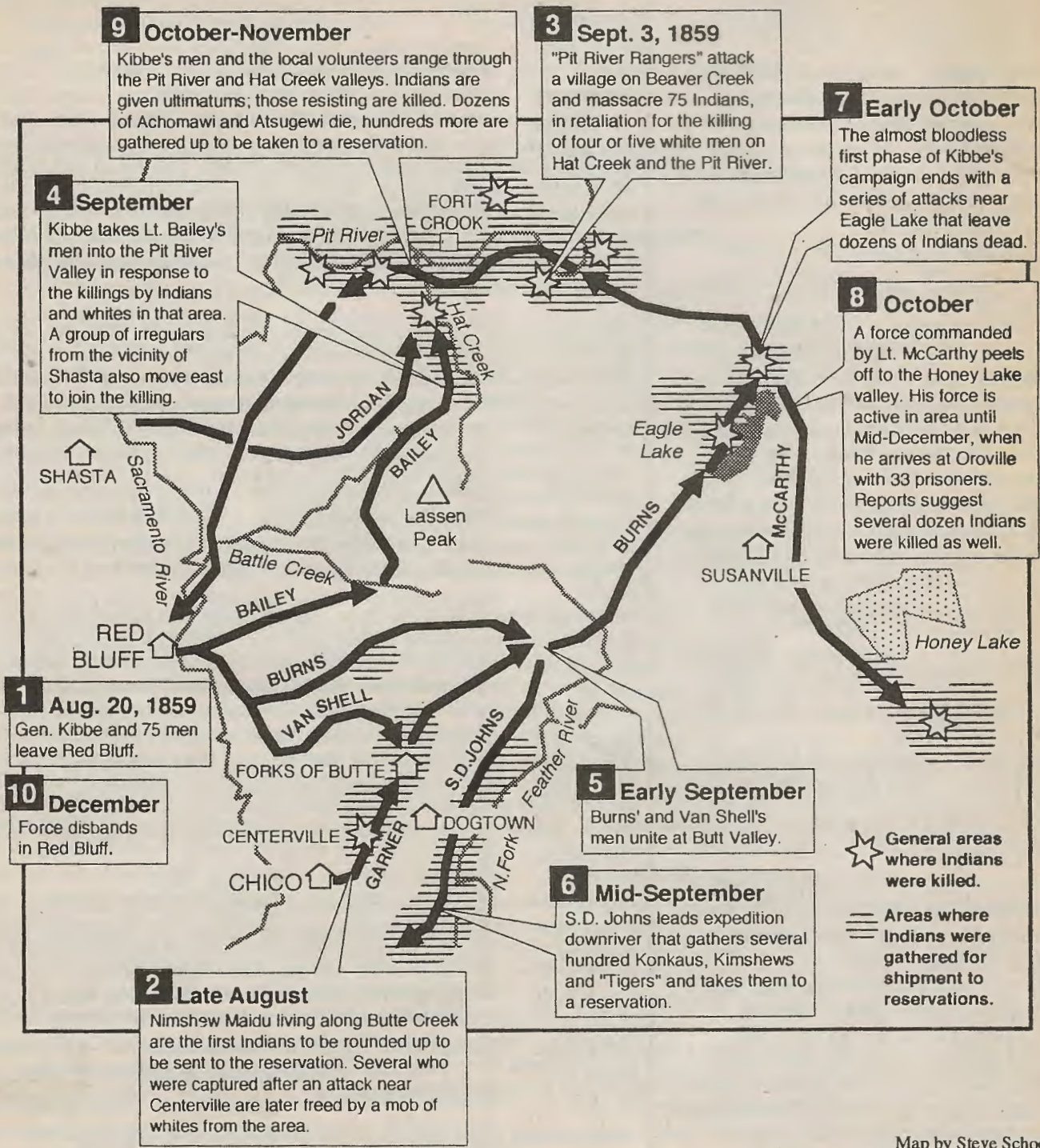
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Map by Steve Schoonover

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with authority to raise a force to scour the hills.

He recruited 75 men in Red Bluff. Another company formed in Chico under the command of Coon Garner and acted in coordination with Kibbe, although it's not clear if this force was within his franchise. Two other shadowy forces, the Pit River Rangers and a company raised near Shasta City, also enter the picture.

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NOTICE.

A COMPANY of not exceeding eighty men will be organized at Red Bluff On Monday the 15th instant, for a campaign against the Deer Creek and Antelope Indians. None but men inured to the hardships of mountain life, and experienced with the use of the rifle required. Further particulars may be obtained from the undersigned.

WM. C. KIBBE,
Adjutant General State of California.
Red Bluff, August 9, 1859.

As for Capt. Flint's regulars, they remained in camp just east of Red Bluff until early September, when they moved north to join other federal soldiers -- Companies A and F of the 1st Dragoons -- who were based at Fort Crook, just north of the Pit River.

On or about Aug. 20, 1859, when Breckenridge's force was returning from the hills, Kibbe headed in. He divided his force into three parts.

A northern column under Lt. Bailey moved almost due east without incident, and was in Battle Creek Meadows by August 29.

In the center, Capt. Burns (his name also appears as Byrnes) and about 25 men moved up the Lassen Trail between Deer Creek and Mill Creek. He swooped down on the survivors of Breckenridge's raid in Deer Creek canyon on August 24, and took the Indians captive without bloodshed. The prisoners were marched west, to be taken to one of the reservations then operating in Northern California.

To the south, Lt. Van Shell's company (with Kibbe accompanying him) climbed over the Cohasset Ridge, and came down on Forks of Butte from the north, while Coon Garner and 27 men came up Butte Creek canyon from the west.

Along the way, Garner raided an Indian village a half-mile from Centerville, killing three Nimshew Maidu and taking 10 or 12 prisoner. Garner left four men to guard the prisoners, and moved on to meet Kibbe and Van Shell further upstream. The angry residents of Centerville secured the assistance of a deputy sheriff and arrested the four guards, setting the Indians free. Kibbe interceded, and ordered the four whites released. There's no report of what happened to the freed Indians.

In the meantime, Van Shell's and Garner's men were gathering up Indians in the vicinity of Forks of Butte, and shipping them off to the reservation with a guard under the command of a Lt. McCarthy.

In early September Van Shell and Burns reunited in Butt Valley. As most of the force recuperated, a detachment under Kibbe's commissary officer, S. D. Johns, moved south along the West Branch of the Feather River. They seized Kimshews, Konkous and "Tigers" and took them to Red Bluff. Johns arrived there on September 24 with 218 Indians, not counting children. Among them were three Konkau chiefs: Tippee - who was said to be dangerous and daring - Moolak and Yumyau. Yumyau was reported to be the overall chief of a thousand Indi-

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ans. He was "very intelligent," the newspapers reported, as he spoke English.

Thus far, about 250 to 300 Maidu had been taken from their homes, and were being shipped to the Nome Cult Indian Farm at Round Valley in the Coast Ranges, or the Mendocino Reservation on the coast. There'd been no bloodshed in the southern phase of the campaign, except for the casualties of Garner's move up Butte Creek canyon. The picture was already quite different in the north.

A few days before Kibbe moved into the hills, word had come down to Red Bluff of murders in mid-August of John Callahan and a boy, John Rizer, during an Indian raid against the Hat Creek stage station on the road from Red Bluff and Shasta City to Yreka. On the 20th of the month, Napoleon McElroy and David Welch were slain at a bridge and road they were building at the Pit River, further up the same road. Samuel Burney — namesake of the town of Burney — and an Indian boy had been killed a few miles further west back in late March or early April.

The raids were blamed on a Hat Creek chief the whites dubbed "Shavehead." As the weeks went by, Shavehead would become the scapegoat for all of the Indian attacks from Butte Creek to the Pit River, Honey Lake to Red Bluff. In the reports, his band would grow to 60 to 80 warriors, gathered together from several tribes.

The news of the killings in the north came too late for Kibbe to revise his original plan. But necessity forced a change before the month of September was very old.

Although a cavalry detachment from Fort Crook headed out in a systematic search of the Indians guilty of the murders, some of the settlers favored a less precise solution.

Frank McElroy, one of the slain men's brother, ar-

rived in the area with a few men seeking blood. They were joined by others from among the scattered settlements along the Pit River and Hat Creek. The party was drawn from the underside of local society. An observer, C.H. Manning, later described them as "men of the roughest character...whose white skins covered hearts as black, and natures as savage as the red men they sought to destroy."

Among them was Sam Lockhart, a ruffian who'd been waging a one-man war against the local Indians since they'd killed his twin brother, Henry, two years earlier. There's even some suspicion Lockhart might have killed McElroy and Welch, as the toll bridge they were building across the Pit River would have put Lockhart's adjacent ferry out of business.

The Pit River Rangers, as the company called itself, conducted a few cursory patrols and some dedicated drinking for a few days, before reeling drunkenly out of town September 2 enroute to Beaver Creek, where white settler John Rolfe had a camp of Achomawi laborers on his ranch.

The 22 Rangers formed a half-circle around the village during the night, and attacked the harmless Indians at dawn on September 3. About a dozen Indian men fell in the initial shooting before the remainder escaped. The women and children remained cowering in the village, trusting in past assurances that white men didn't conduct indiscriminate slaughter of innocents.

That was not the case this time.

The white war party swept down on the women and children with hatchets and revolvers, and murdered dozens of them. The reports on the massacre put the Indian death toll between 60 and 90, only a handful of whom were men.

There was only one white fatality: Frank McElroy. One report says his actions against the Indian women and children were so extreme that he was gunned down by several of the other white raiders. Another version of his death states he stood up to charge into the village just as a drunken Ranger behind him fired off a load of buckshot. Six pellets hit McElroy in the back, mortally wounding him.

The attack evoked a hue and cry of outrage from throughout northern California. Captain John Adams, commanding the dragoons at Fort Crook, drafted an order to take into custody Captain John Langley, commander of the Rangers. But Kibbe arrived on the scene first.

When the word of what was happening in the north reached him, Kibbe moved to take command of Lt. Bailey's force, then encamped at Battle Creek Meadows.

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He took it north through the Hat Creek valley and arrived in time to impose himself between the U.S. troops and the raiders. Another 24 irregulars arrived to support Kibbe at about the same time. They were Captain Jordan's Pine Grove Rangers, recruited from the rougher element around Shasta City that had a hankering to shed some Indian blood.

There was a disagreement at this time between the state and federal governments as to whose "problem" the California Indians were. In this instance, the federal official deferred to the state's man, although Adams called for reinforcements should it come to conflict.

A detachment of the dragoons under Lieutenant Milton Carr was summoned back from Susanville, and Captain Flint's infantry got the order to march up from Red Bluff. Flint's men arrived in poor condition, and headed back to the valley after a few weeks, retreating all the way to Benicia before October was over.

The dragoons did little for the rest of that season but patrol the roads in the area, staying out of the way as Kibbe's force worked over the valley.

The force at Butt Valley now received an order to move north and help. Captain Burns divided the force into three parts, with Lieutenant Van Shell leading the way. The force was moving through the Big Meadows (which are now flooded beneath Lake Almanor) when a soldier, Alexander Moncheff, suffered a mortal wound September 17 when a rifle discharged accidentally while its owner was dismounting from a horse. Moncheff died September 21.

However, Kibbe reported that no white men were killed during the course of his campaign. Perhaps he wrote off Moncheff as an accident, and dismissed McElroy's death because the man was not one of those recruited for Kibbe's command. The reported death in late August of James McLaughlin, one of the Shasta volunteers, from an arrow wound to the forehead might have been ignored for the same reason. A "rumor" of five other white fatalities was also reported in the *Shasta Courier*.

Van Shell continued northeast to Eagle Lake, arriving at the southwest corner of the lake on October 4. Scouts sighted smoke rising from an Indian village on the northeast point of the lake, and Lt. Van Shell led a detachment north to deal with the Indians.

Along the way, five Indians were ambushed on the lake shore. They fled into some tules, but were found and killed. One Indian hurled his rifle out into the lake to keep it out of the white men's hands.

Van Shell pressed on, finding some Indians with whom he could attempt negotiations. Kibbe reported

later that the talks would have been successful were it not for some "squawmen" - white men who lived in the company of the Indians - who spoiled everything by saying the raiders could not be trusted.

The failure of talking cleared the way for fighting, in the white men's eyes, and Van Shell swept forward. When Kibbe returned to Red Bluff for provision on October 10, he said Van Shell's men had killed "quite a few" Indians, taken many more prisoner, and burned all their rancherias. One battle was reported in the *Shasta Courier*, in which 14 Indians died and 29 were taken prisoner.

At some point, a detachment of 18 men under Lt. McCarthy headed south to the Honey Lake valley to deal with some "depredations" there. By mid-October, a dozen Indians had been captured and two dozen killed in that vicinity. McCarthy wouldn't come out of the hills until December 14, when he arrived in Oroville with 33 prisoners bound for the reservation.

Kibbe reassembled the bulk of his force on the Pit River by mid-October, and began a five- or six-week campaign through that valley. The first-hand accounts in the newspapers become sparse at this point. That may be because the correspondents were too busy to keep up their writing, or it may be that they weren't inclined to

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write about what was happening. The accounts just speak of numerous engagements, with 40 Indians killed here, 15 to 20 killed there, "several" killed elsewhere. In a summary at the end of the campaign, Kibbe reported 200 Indians killed in the northern phase of the campaign, but it's not clear that included the Beaver Creek slaughter.

Kibbe's approach was to first secure a meeting with representatives of Indians in an area. He'd then make his "we can't live together so you've got to leave" speech through a translator, including the threat to carry out his wishes by force of arms if the Indians didn't submit willingly.

The Indians, understandably, were not impressed with the message, delivered in the heart of a country that was then still overwhelmingly Indian. In one case reported in some detail, a talk of three hours ended with a promise by a chief to come in and surrender with his tribe the next day. At least that's what Kibbe thought was promised. Since Indian cultures don't give one man the right to order another around - even if white folks happen to think he's a "chief" - it's more likely the Achomawi envoy just carried Kibbe's message back to his people to let them decide.

In this case, only three Indians came in to surrender the next day. The rest weren't ready, they reported. It's likely discussion was still continuing at the Indian rancherias two nights later, when Kibbe's men struck, killing some, taking the rest prisoner.

And so it went for a month and a half. An unsuccessful parley was followed by the surrounding of a village in the dark and an attack at dawn, usually with a shouted order to surrender first. Most of the Indians so confronted did give up, judging from the figures quoted at the close of the campaign. Others surrendered due to

the destruction of stored food supplies, which left them helpless against winter. One source says Kibbe's men led 400 Indian captives out of the north, bound together with rope nooses around their necks. Another puts the number at 533, still another at 700. The *Red Bluff Beacon* reported 650 camped under guard at Red Bluff in early December, although the total had dwindled down to "upwards of 400" when the time came to ship them out.

Shasta Historical Society



SHAVEHEAD

Among the prisoners were Shavehead and his sister "Hat Creek Liz," said to be a leading counselor for the Atsugewi who lived along Hat Creek. They were taken without a struggle, which would seem to contradict his reputation as the source for all the white men's troubles in the region.

The campaign ranged as far as 20 miles to the east of Fort Crook, and about 15 miles to the west. The major battle appears to have been fought at the traditional Indian stronghold on the Tule River, north of the current town of Fall River Mills.

The participants repeatedly stress how "humanely" the campaign was carried out, but there are reasons to doubt that. The sweep was controversial, with a war of words in the newspapers following the war on the ground. At one point, apologists for Kibbe seem to be defending the apparent kidnapping of two Indian children to force a parley, and then the killing of two of the three Indian envoys who responded. The Indians were killed, a correspondent wrote, because they knew of the

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plan to remove all the natives from the area. Presumably, the reason for the meeting was to inform the Indians that they were being removed, so the justification for the killing seems a bit thin.

It should be mentioned that although the justification for Kibbe's campaign was the Yahi Indian raids, they were untouched by the offensive. That may be because they had already been reduced to a small, hard-to-find group, and were even then perfecting the hiding techniques that would keep them free until their last village -- with Ishi and his immediate family -- was discovered in 1908.

There are also reasons to question exactly what Kibbe thought he was accomplishing by gathering up Indians to be taken to the reservation. Even as he was heading into the hills, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs was reporting to Congress that the California reservations were a failure, unable to provide the Indians with a livelihood or protect them from the depredations of encroaching whites. Indians were fleeing the reservations by the hundreds at the same time Kibbe was gathering up hundreds of others to concentrate there.

The reason for the flight was obvious. A correspondent from Round Valley wrote to the *Red Bluff Beacon* that the Nome Cult Indian Farm was "a curse to the valley." A force of 20 rangers had been formed there under a Capt. Jarboe, and they'd been on the warpath for some time. "He has, of course, been compelled to kill great numbers, but has not made an indiscriminate slaughter."

"Now, the question is," the writer continued, "how to rid ourselves of this great annoyance... The settlers... are determined to put a stop to it, if there is any virtue in gunpowder and lead."

Into this environment, at the same time the letter was being written, columns of Maidu captured in the early part of the campaign were being marched under guard.

But someone in the government apparently figured out that Round Valley wasn't a good place to send the Indians captured later along the Pit River and Hat Creek. On December 10, the steamer *Sam Soule* docked in Red Bluff, with orders to take the prisoners south on the first stage of a trip to the Tejon Reservation in the Tehachapi Mountains of Southern California. Four hundred Indians were forced onto the ship in less than an hour, and it sailed off downstream.

The orders were changed along the way, and after changing ships twice, the group was finally disembarked at the Mendocino Reservation on the north coast before the year ended.

But many of them didn't stay there, or at Round Valley, for long. By 1863, when Butte County whites

decided to evict the local Indians following the killing of several white children, the settlers were able to gather up hundreds from the very areas that Kibbe had allegedly emptied four years earlier. The Indians were gathered at Chico, to again be taken to Round Valley. And there among them was Shavehead himself, who'd been caught in the round-up while searching for a missing sister.

In the end, the brutality of Kibbe's campaign was futile. That may be why the expedition gets such short shrift in the telling of Northern California history.

About the author:

Steve Schoonover is working on a new book about the Yahi Indians of northern California. This story was extracted from information gathered during his research.

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