

Ishi In Two Worlds

A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America

Theodora Kroeber

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The subtitle says that Ishi was a "Wild Indian" but Tom Andrews speaks of him as a man stepping out of the Stone Age into the Modern Age, a way of thinking of this particular individual that I prefer. "Wild" is a misnomer.

Much is also made of Ishi's response to the modern world into which he wandered, but I think more is to be learned from that world's response to him. Ishi was a remarkable individual with an incredibly unique and fortuitous life story. True, there is much that can be inferred from a stone age man's response to the modern world, and true, it is sad that Ishi and we didn't have more time together to explore the possibilities, but, it is just one stone age man's response to one version of the modern world into which he wandered, not a complete commentary from "paradise" on modernity.

The basic story is told in two parts. The first part concerns the eradication of the natives from California, primarily by the gold rushers in the last half of the 19th century. The second part is the story of Ishi, one of a small handful of survivors who was not relocated to a concentration camp called a "reservation." He encountered "civilization" after most of the killing was over, and was lucky to be picked up by academics as a university museum exhibit rather than merely being slaughtered as just another "wild" savage.

Ishi was a Yana, one of four groups of Yahi who lived in the vicinity of Mt. Lassen. The Yahi and most other natives on the west coast had no concept of real estate and private property, the first of many conflicts with the incoming culture. They lived off the land following its cycles. They processed and ate a carefully boiled meal mash made of acorns, they hunted animals up to deer-size. They tapped into the annual salmon runs up the local rivers. They took only what they needed and used everything completely. They saved food ahead so they could survive to the next gathering opportunities. They had beliefs, customs, standards, instructive oral legends, and, to my surprise, social classes. (I'm always surprised when "different" humans behave the same as "regular" humans. Maybe they are not so different.) Some of these "wild" people were more well-to-do than others. Was this because they were more skilled or more successful hunters?

Ishi was not from the uppermost class of his society, nor was he at the bottom, one who would have to sit nearest the smoke hole in the tent. He was a competent, talented, and accomplished individual within his own set of necessary trades. He could make fire, he could make a bow and arrows and could use them effectively, and he always went barefoot in the wild because that was

one of many ways in which he stayed in touch with his environment. His feet were, therefore, considered to be “perfect” by anthropologists and presumably podiatrists.

The removal of the natives from this territory is a story that bears telling. Records are sketchy but the author does what she can to stitch them together.

For thousands of years, at least three thousand and possibly much longer, about 300,000 natives lived, subsistence, in what is now known as the State of California. They lived much as described above, traveling over many of the same routes we use today. This, then, would seem to constitute the “carrying capacity” of this land. At least 150 times that many people live on the same land today.

Beginning in the 16th century, Europeans came to the area, Spaniards in particular. They were here for “God, Gold, and Glory.” They set up missions and worked to convert the heathen natives to Christianity. They were under the rule of law and of the church and, although there were conflicts between the native and occupying cultures, the relationships were largely productive on both sides. The “standard of living” of some of the natives increased slightly and some were converted both to the European religion and culture. Most were left unchanged and untouched, however, save a rare visit or two from a passing padre. The natives outnumbered the invaders by ten to one. The ultimate result of this meshing of cultures is seen in Mexico today. Mexicans are an inextricable mix of natives with the dominating Spaniard immigrants.

By contrast, the gold rush that began in 1849 brought ten times as many white people to the area as resident natives. The white people’s prior experience of natives, subduing the east coast then crossing the plains, had been nearly entirely hostile and that hostility was projected onto the natives on the west coast who were, in any case, seriously outgunned. The white gold-rushers did not come with families, they came as prospectors, were not particularly interested in anything resembling the rule of law, and, by philosophy and approach to life, could not coexist on their newly claimed real estate with any pre-existing natives. They treated them as animals to be eradicated and systematically eliminated them sometimes even by sport.

There was a dimension of misunderstanding between of cultures here that was millennia old. The natives, living off the land, would tend to take whatever animals they needed that were available for example, not realizing that the white men, living on their claimed and surveyed ranches considered the animals to be their own personal property. This misunderstanding was never considered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however. The natives were sub-human, immoral (thieves), bothersome, dispensable, and good for target practice.

It was the world in which this eradication was fully underway into which Ishi was born and grew up as one of the last remaining natives. Although he learned the trades of his people and was skillful at what he needed to do to survive off the land, his social life within his tribe cannot have been what would have been normal five hundred or even one hundred years earlier. Most of his early majority could not have been in a fully functioning tribe with fully functioning neighboring

tribes with which to share and spar and intermarry. Most of his life was spent subsisting on what territory remained as the white settlers moved in relentlessly, carving up the land into real estate with owners. Tribes were massacred or taken into captivity and moved to worthless reservations. Many were slaughtered in small groups as they encountered settlers. Some were taken into servitude or intermarried with lower classes, or were subsumed through rape and murder.

The gold rushers had little more respect for each other. California was largely populated by white people who walked over each other's dead and dying bodies to get to the gold, or at least the food, from beyond the Sierra Nevada's from whence they had come. There was little compassion for anyone or their plight. This is well illuminated in the interesting side story of J. Goldsborough Bruff, a prospector who left his family in Pennsylvania to come out and get rich for a year and a half then return. At least that was his original plan. He ran out of supplies in Yahi country and stayed behind with abandoned equipment in what became known as Bruff's Camp. Sitting in Bruff's Camp while other prospectors passed by, he took care of many of their needs, feeding them, burying their dead, and even taking care of one of their infants. Despite all this largesse, no one ever offered to help him get the rest of the way to "civilization" only about 30 more miles. Eventually he headed out on his own and, while on this journey encountered a native who might well have been Ishi. He seriously considered shooting and eating Ishi, but in part due to a pleasant encounter between the two men's dogs, did not.

Ishi never married. The prospects were declining throughout his life. As the consolidation of California closed out, circa the 1890s, Ishi was left in a group of five people that included his sister or cousin, an older woman possibly his mother, an older unrelated man and one other. They moved about and did all their business without leaving a trace or ever signaling their presence. Chaparral that the white man would consider a barrier or would hack out to make trails *was* their trails. They tunneled through. During these final years of concealment they lived in a small village they called Wowunupo mu tetna, "Grizzly Bear's Hiding Place." Yes, there was a real Grizzly Bear story to go with this name.

One day in 1908, a survey party preparing for a dam in the area stumbled into the village. They were not hostile, merely clueless. The natives were terrified and fled into the bushes. The surveyors did not try to kill them, they treated the place as an amusement and took the native's tools and food as souvenirs. This was, of course, heartless. Between natural, accidental, or unknown death of his companions, Ishi was soon left completely alone to mourn in solitude.

Thomas Waterman from the University of California, Berkeley was interested in the anthropology of the natives in this region and exerted some effort looking for any who might have survived this encounter, but eventually gave up.

We do not know Ishi's actual name. His culture did not permit a person to speak his own name. It was considered promiscuous. The word "Ishi" means "Man" in Yahi. "Ishi" was the name given by his scholastic caretakers after he came to the modern world.

One day in August 1911, the dogs at a slaughterhouse had something cornered in the corral. It was a man! Against all odds the white people didn't just kill the man because he was a subhuman native, they called the sheriff. Sheriff Webber came up from Oroville, retrieved Ishi from the dogs, cleaned him up, and put him in the jail. He was not incarcerated, he was just in there for his own protection and so that he could be fed and cared for while they tried to figure out what to do. The gawkers started coming with the earliest newspaper reports but only a few who might be useful, Mexicans, other Indians and keepers, were allowed to see him.

Why was Ishi trapped in the corral tens of miles from his native lands? No one knows, but it seems likely that he had decided to give up, or in hope of different prospects, had wandered off to another territory. Subsistence living is difficult, a lot of work, and requires luck. It is barely possible in a large group where work specialities permit some efficiencies of scale. It is much more difficult alone.

Although we do not know his exact age, Ishi was about the age I am now, mid-50s, when he switched cultures.

They could not speak to Ishi, of course, and he refused to eat at first. Telegrams went out all over the area and at length, Waterman came to Oroville to bring Ishi to San Francisco. Ishi adapted quickly to the white man's clothing he was offered, excepting shoes. He had always feared trains, "the white man's demon that drives them around," but, trusting Waterman, he got on the train and was on his way to life in a museum. He would be supervised and defended there by Professor A. L. Kroeber, husband of the author.

As they learned enough of each other's languages to communicate, Ishi was put on staff at the museum as an assistant janitor for \$25 / week, and lived on the premises. Waterman, Kroeber, and a doctor at the hospital next door, Dr. Saxton Pope, became close friends with Ishi. There were also some other natives to whom he was exposed and could communicate some including Sam Batwi from the Mt. Shasta area, and Juan Dolores, from Arizona.

Ishi learned of white-man's ways, of earning and saving money, performing surgery on living people, being a guest in someone's home, riding the cable car to get food at a store, using an indoor toilet, and amazing matches (to start fires), to various forms of recreation from riding in a car to going to the beach or a vaudeville show. He also taught us about the aboriginal life at which *he* was so expert. A museum of natural history was a perfect setting for this. Children could come and watch him make an arrowhead from native tools and materials, then he would give it to one of them as a souvenir.

I found it interesting the degree of skill and technique required for stone age life. The procedure for lighting a fire using a wood needle of just the right sort of wood prepared in just the right way and surrounded by just the right initial inflammatory products was still exhaustingly energy intensive. The selection of and preparation of wood for arrows and bows, the use of various attach materials, just such a part from just such an animal or plant, all of this indicates a high

degree of technological, if subsistence, sophistication. I was therefore offended when the U. S. Government felt the need to classify Ishi as being a ward of his caretakers with about the competence of a six year old. Perhaps in the use of the English language, the street car, or complex financial instruments, but really, a six year-old? I bet the government bureaucrat classifiers couldn't start a fire from wood!

Ishi demonstrated for us how his shelters were built and from what. He was saving up to buy a horse and carriage, not being impressed by automobiles or even airplanes ... 'birds do much better than that easily,' he remarked. 'Did he believe in God?' the concerned evangelist wondered. His response to that question was "Sure, Mike!"

Eventually an expedition was organized with Waterman, Pope, and the rancher who now owned the land where Ishi had originally lived to go up into his country and have him demonstrate life there for cameras and journal keepers. Early recordings and films of this and other experiences are currently (possibly permanently) lost, but many photographs survive and are reproduced in the book. The notion of packing in on mules was uncomfortable to Ishi, but he went along with it. When there, he dressed as he would have in that environment, usually only a loin cloth. He made harpoons and speared fish, bows and arrows and hunted deer, dressing out his kill in the traditional ways. He showed them various places where he had gone, cliffs scaled, streams crossed, the ruins of villages. He made baskets and tools and showed how things fit together. They lived in shelters that he showed them how to construct.

Interestingly, he no longer considered that life and place to be his home. His friends were now in the big city and he belonged there, despite his intense dislike of crowds. (I understand that.) When they returned to the museum and white man's clothing, he was happy.

It is a fantasy to think that more than a few people could live subsistence in the country around here (southern California), which is less lush than Ishi's.

Although it was Ishi's culture to pull out beard whiskers whenever they came in and it was unthinkable for a man to have facial hair, he respected Kroeber, who had a large, dark, full beard, as being a great chief in his own culture symbolized by his very beard. Ishi was able to adapt across culture in that way.

Ishi died in 1916 from tuberculosis, a European disease against which he had no protection. The ones who survive the ravages of conquerors and sport hunters die from their diseases.

Ishi in Two Worlds was written by Theodora Kroeber, Professor Kroeber's second wife, in the 1960s and the forward was written by their son Karl. Although the University of California Press did not think there was any value in the book, they published it anyway, under political pressure, and it is the most successful, indeed, the only money-making book, the Press has ever produced.

I find the country that the 300,000 natives of what we now call California lived in to be fairly bleak, not so much as the great plains, but certainly not lush and full of life like the forests of the eastern portion of the continent. I have great respect for those who could live here, off only the land and what it provided. Very clever these Yanas and Yahis, And Ishi.