Natural-Born Proud

Martin Jr., S.R.

Published by Utah State University Press

Martin Jr., S.R.
Natural-Born Proud: A Revery.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/1274.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1274

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=253699
That night, I lay curled up in my warm down bag, looking up at the busy sky, swatting dive bomber mosquitoes, listening to the river chuckling under its breath and to the coyotes howling across the high plateau. Their cries sounded faintly like I imagined Indians singing might sound—high, sharp, soaring sounds. Falling asleep, I wondered what that country was like when the Indians had it. How did those ancient red men live? Did they, too, catch fish out of the Pit River? I imagined I could see them working their fields, trapping and killing game, fishing the streams and dancing around their fires, their chants ringing across the sky. I couldn’t name the country’s special quality, but I could feel it like a breath on the back of my neck.

Before going on that hunt, I had read about the Indians in Modoc, partly to complete a history assignment and partly because of my upcoming trip. The book I read said that the Indians who gave their name to the county were part of the Plateau branch of the Penutian-speaking people and had lived in southwest Oregon and northern California, around Modoc Lake (now called Lower Klamath Lake) and Tule Lake. The neighboring Pit River Indians, who spoke Palaihnihan, a Hokan language, also lived near Tule Lake and along the river that was named after them because of the pits they dug near it to trap game. Both they and the Modocs gathered roots, seeds, and berries; lived off the resources of the rivers and lakes; and hunted game. The Modocs, like their cousins, the Klamaths, harvested salmon and made meal and flour from wokas, seeds of the water lilies growing in their lakes.

The Indian bands in Modoc set up their villages and gathered food in different spots each year so the earth could regenerate
itself. They arranged their tule and brush huts in a horseshoe shape with the openings facing Mt. Shasta and Mt. Lassen. They built burial mounds in the foothills so their dead could see the volcanoes. Every spring they traveled through the lava beds to the mountains to visit their ancestors and to commune with their gods. They took food to share with family members gone from visible life, and they taught their children to mingle their spirits with those of their forefathers, spirits that moved in and out of their bodies. I wished I had been alive to see those Modocs back in the olden days.

I also knew a little bit about Indians from the experience of our family living in Arizona when I was small. But most of what I took for recollection probably came from hearing the Old Man repeat the stories time and again. I had little snapshots of those days in my head—the Old Man preaching on the San Carlos Reservation, the little kids dancing around in circles, wordless and clapping their hands while Mom sang and the Old Man played the guitar he’d learned to cowboy pick on a Wyoming dude ranch.

My dad and those Indians liked each other. They said he looked Indian because of his high cheek bones and beak nose. He said the Indians were a spiritual people, which put them in the way to know God and to hear the Gospel. Being in Modoc reminded me of Arizona and brought those mental pictures back into sharp focus. Long after everyone else had started to buzz, growl and snort, I finally fell asleep looking forward to my trip the next day. I dreamed I was an Indian boy driving the Weapons Carrier across the San Carlos Reservation looking for a place to swim. A red-haired girl rode beside me, and I woke up in the morning with a throbbing erection.

Contrary to his pattern, Bub didn’t want to tag along, so I took off alone right after breakfast. None of the others really wanted to go, which was fine with me. I had a private errand to do in Fall River: I needed to revisit the territory I had conquered. I was scared, but I was determined to find out what would happen when I went back to that town. Winding along the river at a comfortable speed, I let my mind wander back over the events of the previous day, afraid and confident at the same time, the knot in my stomach larger than the one shrinking on my head.
I drove slowly, meditatively. I was tense, so I relaxed myself by looking over the spectacular terrain. I was a tiny speck on a huge map. Seen from the Pit River Road, Fall River Mills and the surrounding mountains stood in sharp contrast to each other. The easterly mountains were a bumpy rim of the landscape. Off in the west, the Sierra Nevada Range formed a jagged, purple boundary, broken by the giant volcanoes. The town nestled in a curve in the road and looked out across a wide plateau toward the mountain range to the east. Fall River Mills was a lumber town of about five hundred. The mill, owned by the Fruit Grower’s Corporation which also owned thousands of acres of rich farmland down in the Sacramento and Santa Clara Valleys, took up one whole side of it. Across from the mill, the rest of the town fanned out in a half-circle—the downtown, rows of identical company houses fingerling their way down paved streets to a fringe of individual private homes, then the abrupt edge where sage brush and mullein commenced.

The big contraptions inside the mill pulsated in a constant rumbling that was felt more than heard all over town twenty-four hours a day, six days a week. When the mill hands burned shavings at night, the mesh tops of the cone-shaped incinerators glowed red, and firework showers of sparks popped and bounced out of them, moths around a candle. The pond the workers floated the logs in looked like dark brown soup, and in the hot, early fall weather, the yeasty odor of rotting wood and stagnant water, sour as buttermilk, blanketed the town like one of those Sacramento Valley “tule” fogs. More than once over the years we went there, I saw the tall Fruit Growers stacks puke out thick, black soot and smoke that blew off in clouds on windy days. When no wind blew, the stuff snowed down and coated everything with a film of sooty, greasy dirt that was hard to wash off.

I hurried down the main street for the drive-in as if drawn by a magnet, my mind buzzing back over what had happened. I parked the truck and was preparing to step down when I saw the drive-in kid coming toward me. The same two girls from the day before were working inside. Suddenly I understood what some of the questions I needed to answer were: Had I won the previous day’s
battle decisively? Would I have to fight again? Would those girls see me as superior to that white kid?

I was ready to duke it out again, but he grinned. “You shur do hit hard. Look here,” he said, raising the front of his shirt and showing me a dark bruise about the size of my fist on his belly. That seemed a fair exchange for the bump on my head, which I kept covered with my hunting cap. I relaxed a little, figuring that my winning the first round meant that I’d probably not have to fight him again.

“I just finished what you started,” I said.
“Aw, hell,” he replied, “I didn’t mean nothin by it. Jus funnin.”
“Well, you can’t have any fun with me by cursing at me and calling me boy.” I didn’t mention his tripping me.
“I’m sorry ’bout that. What’s yer name? Mine’s Harry Walker.”
“Satch Hankerson.”
We shook hands and shuffled around for a moment.
“Where you camped at, Satch?”
“Up on Baker Mountain above White Horse.”
“Got yer own gun?”
“Sure. A brand new .250-3000 Savage.”
“God-dern! Bet it’s purty.”
“Damn right it is, boy.”
I’d have given almost anything not to have said that last word. He winced, but didn’t say anything. He was trying to be friendly. He’d been acting tough for the girls in the restaurant the day before, just like Deke had said, but he still reminded me of Tim Grogan, and that made me edgy.

He propped one foot up on the running board and looked the truck over admiringly.
“Whose army truck?” he asked.
“My old man’s.”
“Lets you drive ’er by yerself, huh?”
“Yes.” I didn’t tell him this was the first time.
“Got yer license?”
“I get it next year.”
“Yer old man let you stay outta school to go deer huntin?” I nodded.
“Mine don’t. He lets me skip school sometimes to work here or go cut firewood,” he muttered enviously. I shrugged.

“Some guys’re just lucky, I guess.”

“What year in school’re you?”

“Sophomore.”

“You like school?”

“Pretty much.”

“Oh. Git good grades?”

“Good enough to keep my old man off my back.”

There was a pause in the conversation. Then he resumed, “You gonna go to college?”

“Sure. Aren’t you?”

“Hell no! Me, I’m gonna quit school next year when I’m sixteen like my brother done. Git me a pickup and haul firewood. Then I can hunt when I damn please. Leastways when I ain’t out chasin’ nooky.” He drew the corners of his mouth down and winked at me. Thinking of the redhead I’d seen the day before, I said,

“You’ve got some pretty girls up here, all right.”

He abruptly changed the subject.

“Ever been huntin here before, Satch?”

“Nope.”

“Ain’t many of your people comes up here huntin. They stays mostly over to Quincy and down ’round Sacramento.” I thought, damn, I knew it. This redneck’s gonna tell me about my people and where we’re supposed to be. He’s like Tim Grogan, all right. I shrugged again. Gazing off toward the eastern mountains, he went on, “White Horse. By God, there’s lots a big deer over in them lava beds. I seen a six-point there once. Mighty fine country, too. Indian country, y’know.” I could see more coming—the cat was going to tell me about Indians too.

“Yep,” I said, feeling in control of things. I could whip him, I was on a hunting vacation and he was working, so I felt increasingly confident. I could afford to waste a little time before getting Deke’s gun, so I decided to have another malt and see what this Harry had to say. Just to goad him on a bit.

When I returned and got back in behind the wheel, he was sitting back casually against the side of the truck, arms folded, ankles
crossed. “Indian country,” he resumed, having waited patiently for my return. “Folks here ’bouts says back in the olden days there was thousands a Indians all through this here country. They come down from Canada, over from Idaho and Nevada and everywheres. There was a whole lots more a them than there was a the white people come in here to settle.”

He unfolded his arms so he could gesture and continued: “And them som’bitches was tough, too. You had to shoot ’em in the gut or chest to stop ’em, ’cause if you shot ’em in the arm or leg, why they’d just take an hop on their ponies an ride off into the woods or the lava beds. Then you’d never ketch ’em.”

“They’d come a swarmin down, hundreds and thousands of ’em. And they’d be a rustlin and a rapin and a killin. Sometimes they’d do somethin to women to make squaws out of ’em, ’cause no self-respectin white woman would hook up with no Indian buck on her own.” I thought to myself that he talked about white people and Indians as if I were colorless, or stupid.

Them redskins liked nothin better’n to sneak up an shoot a white man in the back with a gun they’d stole or one a them bow’n arras, an add his scalp to the belts they made out of ’em. Fact I got some arra heads from ’round here back at the house. An if they was to ketch a hunter or trapper out in the hills by his self, why they’d take an cook ’im up and eat ’im. They had medicine men they figgered was gods an all, an them medicine men would give ’em weeds to smoke or roots to chew that made ’em wild. An that’s when they’d go on a rampage. They was savage, boy...uh, Satch.”

I didn’t fault him for that “boy” since he changed it quickly and since I myself had made the same mistake. I stared off at the surrounding mountains. The books I’d read about the Modoc Indians said the white settlers wanted their land, so the whites herded the Modocs onto the Klamath Reservation over in Oregon. Then the army kept them there, like prisoners, jammed in with their old enemies, the Snake and Klamath tribes. I trusted the books a whole lot more than I did this Harry. I said, “I’d heard that there never were all that many Indians here and that the white settlers put them on reservations a long time ago. Besides, the Modocs didn’t seem like people who’d go out killing and burning.
“Who told you that?” he asked suspiciously.

“No one. I read it.”

“Well, you read wronger ’n shit,” he exclaimed confidently, for all the world like Tim Grogan when he had said, “Satch can wait for us.”

“There was lots and lots a them bastards, an they was meaner ’n hell. They didn’t take an go to no reservations until after that Modoc War what happened over ’round White Horse, where you’re camped at.”

“What was that?” I asked, though I already knew, and felt like I did in school when I had studied hard and had a test snookered.

“Well,” he resumed, pacing back and forth alongside the truck.

“The baddest renegade of ’em all was a chief name of Cap’n Jack, a giant, damn near seven foot tall, that could bust a man’s skull with one blow from his tommy hawk. He was cross-eyed, but a crack shot. An he drank human blood.” He grimaced and spat on the ground.

“Had about six white wives he’d stole an about twenty half-breed brats. Wouldn’t have nothin to do with no Indian woman. He decided to drive the settlers clean outta this country, so he took an’ rounded up a big army a braves—two, three thousand of ’em—an come ridin an raidin down through Big Valley here. They musta killed about a thousand white people. Even a general in the Army, the one they named the town of Canby after. An they burned Adin an a couple other towns to the ground. I mean it was awful what they done."

He really warmed up to his story. “Well, anyway, the army commander sent down to Sacramento for more troops, an then they lit out after them redskins. Caught ’em, too. Over in the lava beds. Took ’em ’bout a month to roust all the damn Indians outta them caves n’ hollers, but they got ’em, by God. A lotta the Indians n’ a few a the soldiers got killed in the fightin. The soldiers hung Cap’n Jack n’ the other leaders. Then they took an moved what was left a the Indians onto the reservation up to Klamath. Even had to build a fort there to keep ’em on the reservation. That’s how the town of Klamath Falls got started. They been purty quiet since then, but you gotta watch out ’cause Indians is one sneaky bunch.”
When he stopped talking, I walked over and threw away my milkshake cup. His story was way off, especially about “Cap’n Jack,” whose real name was Kintpuash, and about the Modoc Wars. Part of my mind told me just to cut out and forget about Harry and his story, but he seemed so cocksure, so self-satisfied I couldn’t resist setting him straight, at least about some of it. And I could sort of get back at Jack Heater by doing this dumb kid in. It was my turn to show off.

“Harry,” I said, climbing in behind the wheel, “Cap’n Jack wasn’t trying to drive anybody anywhere. He was fighting back. He and his people were going to their holy grounds on Mt. Lassen when the U.S. Army tried to ambush ’em. But they couldn’t do it ’cause the Indians would disappear into the lava beds.” I could picture the Modocs not even running away, but silently vanishing along the trails they’d always walked, leaving the soldiers stumbling around in the lava beds like so many Keystone Cops.

Harry must have guessed I didn’t believe any of his story because he started to speak, but stopped. I probably should have stopped too, but I couldn’t. I needed to finish him off for good, like the Old Man should have done Heater. I rushed on, words tumbling out, falling all over each other.

“Over a thousand white troops got together at White Horse to go catch the Indians, but it took ’em more than a year to do it. A year, Harry!

“When they finally got Cap’n Jack, they discovered that he’d had only thirty warriors all along. Thirty Indians killed and wounded over two hundred soldiers! The soldiers killed eight braves and a few women and kids. Then the army guys hung Cap’n Jack and the other leaders at White Horse and sent the rest of the Indians to reservations at Klamath and in Oklahoma. Now that’s what happened in the Modoc Wars, Harry!”

I stopped, slightly out of breath and clutching the steering wheel in both hands, but exhilarated. Harry, red-faced, seemed about to bust wide open. After a long, tense pause, I started the motor and he backed away.

“How come you know so much about it, hunh?” he snarled.
“You never been here before. You said so yourself. You a damned Indian or somethin? Hunh?”

Silently, I backed the truck out into the street. He shouted out to me, “Think you’re smart, don’t ya?”

I pulled over to the curb. I looked him in the eye and said quietly, “Harry, you don’t know shit about Indians. All you know about is white, and that ain’t everything.” With that, I eased out the clutch and moved the truck off smoothly and powerfully. I thought I had had the last word, but I’d briefly let myself forget who I was and where I was. I could see him through the rear view mirror before I could hear him. Standing at the curb, hands cupping his mouth, he yelled at the top of his voice, “God-damned Niggerrrr!” His last word, the same old one white people always fall back on when all else fails.

I shifted into second, beeped the horn twice, and flipped him a bird with my right hand. Way up in the high sky, out toward the Warner Mountains, a V-wedge of Canada geese were honking and humming their way toward Tule Lake. They seemed to be fleeing from the sounds and smells of Fall River Mills. Then I noticed that the wind had blown away the smoke and stench from the mill. Breathing fresh, clean air and cruising along with confidence, I headed toward Cliff Higgins’ gun shop. I felt mostly satisfied as I went. I would never think about the drive-in kid or Tim Grogan in the same way again.