Intermittent fever and the Hudson's Bay Company Brigades of 1832-33 1600 words

From 1780 on sailing ships were reaching the west coast. Soon they were trading between Hawaii, the NW coast, South America and California routes. Much trade was also going from Hawaii to China. Deadly diseases soon reached the coast. This was the beginning of the end for many native people as more extended contact and more direct exposure brought catastrophic illnesses to many areas. Earlier epidemics brought by the Spanish had been bad, but increased travel exposed many more tribes to deadly pathogens. Mortality was often 90% and it is likely many tribes and tribelets vanished before they were met or named by Europeans.

The first rumors of fur trappers from the North in California were in 1820-21, but the first reliable evidence places the Hudson Bay Company's (HBC) Thomas McKay in California in 1825. Many of the fur trapping parties left no records, partly because they were busy, often illiterate and usually trapping illegally. We know much more about the HBC brigades because the chief traders were required to maintain careful records and most of their journals have been preserved. The Hudson's Bay Company brigades seeking beaver were among the most impressive fur trade enterprises in California, beginning in 1827 and continuing until 1843.

The most important expedition took place in 1832-33 under the leadership of Chief Trader John Work. He was a "*conscientious and meticulous man*" according to George Simpson, the company's governor of the northern department. After returning from an expedition to the Snake River Country in July 27, 1832, he was ordered to make a quick turn-around and head up the outgoing California brigade and keep an eye on a smaller California brigade under Michel LaFramboise.

These trading parties were large, well organized and effective. Often with more than 100 people, including wives and children, and 200-300 horses, these brigades moved south from Fort Vancouver (now Vancouver, Washington) into California, reaching as far as the Gulf of California over the course of many months or as long as two years. The men might be salaried workers or freemen, paid on a per fur basis. The women played critical role in preparing food, clothing, camp and processing furs, enabling the men to devote their time to trapping. These brigades often over-wintered at *Camp de los Franceses* (now French Camp just south of Stockton). More like a village on the march than our common perception of fur trappers as solitary or small groups of mountain men, they moved slowly, trading with native people, as well as setting their own traps. They worked their way up and down the state's rivers, streams, and wetlands with expertise honed in the Snake River Country. Working toward creating a 'fur desert" that would discourage American trappers and traders and slow the American advances they took all the beaver they could find, literally wiping out colonies.

The 1832 brigade would have tragic consequences as it carried "intermittent fever", apparently malaria, to California. This deadly disease had made its way into the western fur trade through Fort Vancouver and surrounding tribes beginning in 1830. It is possible that a sick sailor named Jones on the American Brig Owhyhee was patient zero. The disease probably came from Hawaii or China, but perhaps from Central or South America. The native people were convinced the fever was brought by the ship Owhyhee under Capt. John Dominis. The initial impacts near Fort Vancouver were catastrophic in 1830-31, with many villages abandoned and later burned by HBC employees to dispose of the bodies. The Chinook village downstream from the fort was hard hit, with Chief Cassino losing 9 wives, three children, and 16 slaves. Thousands died and as people fled the epidemic they helped spread it. In 1831 the disease was passed around the Northwest by fur traders and native travelers. Most Europeans were sickened, but recovered thanks to quinine, better treatment, and innate resistance; but mortality ranged from 60-90% in the native population.

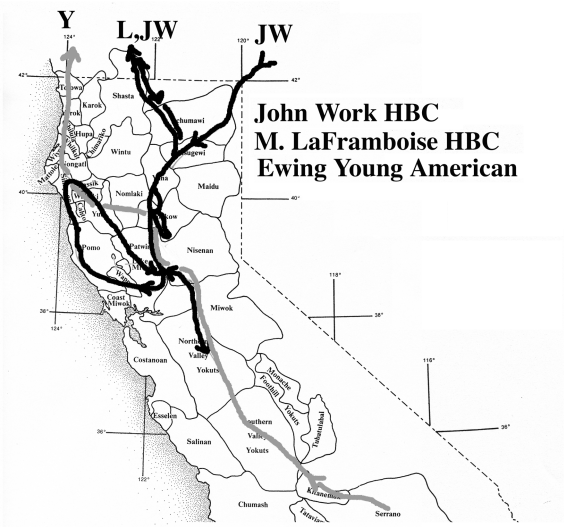
"I am going to start with my ragamuffin freemen to the South"
John Work to Francis Ermantinger, July 27th, 1832 (Dillon, 1975)

The first case of intermittent fever in 1832 was reported at Fort Vancouver on July 5. John Work and his brigade left for California on August 17 with 26 men, 22 women (including his wife Josette), 44 children (including Work's three young girls), and six Indians. They carried the intermittent fever with them. Work's clerk, Francis Payette, was so sick he had to be left at Fort Nez Perce, and the illness delayed their departure until September 9th. Work was dosing ten people for the fever when he left the fort. It is also likely that some of Michel LaFramboise's smaller brigade of 63 people, which left earlier, but would meet Work in California, were also spreading the disease.
The epidemic rose and fell within the brigades over the yearlong expedition, with almost everyone sick at some time. In August 1833 Work notes, *"Some of those who have been longest ill are a little better, the greater number of others are very bad and 7 more are taken ill during the last night and today making in all 72 ill"*. Two men, an Indian and two children died along the way despite medicine (which ran out long before they returned) and care. Work had done an amazing job to limit the losses.

As the HBC trapping parties traveled through the countryside they would trap rivers and side streams and trade with native people. This brought them into contact with many people . Work went down the eastern route to California (Ft. Nez Perce, Malheur Lake, Pit River) while LaFramboise took the central route (Willamette, Umpqua, Shasta) and both returned up the western route after trapping the Sacramento, San Joaquin , Bay area and coast range, see Map 1.

An American fur trapping party under Ewing Young met the HBC brigade along the way and may in turn have picked up the intermittent fever and spread it along their way as well.

Map 1. The fur brigade routes in California 1832-33.

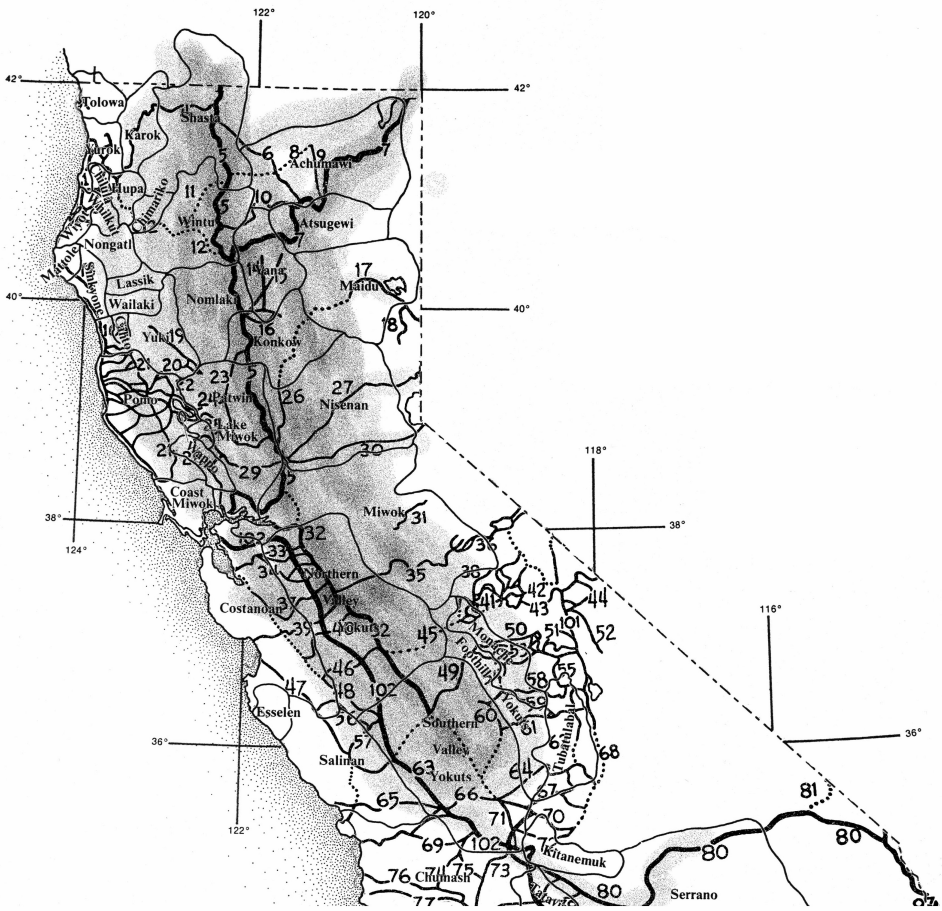


There were plenty of mosquitoes as Work noted on June 1, *1833 "We are much annoyed by muscatoes, they are very numerous."* Three days later he added, *"Muscatoes are like to devour us in every situation that is sheltered a little from the wind"*. The spread of the disease was catastrophic, Map 2. The disease was worst in low lying areas and mosquitos, and diminished on the coast and in the mountains.

Map 2. The impact of the epidemic

Catastrophic Effects

The impact of the disease was clear as they returned north in the fall of 1833, still sick themselves. In his journal on August 6, 1833 Work noted, *"Some sickness prevails among the Indians on the feather river. The villages that were so populous and swarming with inhabitants when we passed that way in Jany or Febry last seem now almost deserted & have a desolate appearance. The few wretched Indians who remain seem wretched they are lying apparently scarcely able to move. …. We are unable to learn the malady or its cause*." From a letter Work sent ahead of the brigade on the way home Dr. McLouglin noted in a subsequent letter, "*Mr. Work writes me that nine-tenths of the Indian population from here (Vancouver) to there (the Sacramento Valley) is mostly destroyed."*



After Davis (1974), Heiser (1978) and Boyd (1999). Area of possible infection extended further than Boyd's estimates based on travels of LaFramboise and Young parties and native traders.

Estimates of deaths are problematic, because so little is known about many of these tribes before they were gone or severely affected. The San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys were valleys of death. As George Yount later recalled, "*The bodies of untold thousands lay whitening the plains and fertile valleys…. Deserted and desolated village sat tenantless all over the valleys…*". Jonathon Warner remembered, *"The banks of the Sacramento River, in its whole course through the valley, were studded with Indian Villages, the houses of which, in the spring, during the day time were red with the salmon the aborigines were curing… On our return, late in the summer of 1833, we found the valleys depopulated. From the head of the Sacramento to the great bend and slough of the San Joaquin, we did not see more than six or eight live Indians, while large numbers of their skulls and dead bodies were to be seen under almost every shade tree, near the water, where the uninhabited and deserted villages had been converted into graveyards"*.

As many as 50,000 people may have died from the epidemic in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys and more than 100,000 in the West. It may have been considerably more over a much larger area as refugees fled and natives traveled the traditional trade routes. This catastrophe had profound impacts on many tribal groups. Some disappeared completely, while others were reduced to starvation, joined with other survivors in new tribelets, or fled, spreading the disease still further. The fever remained in California and was a persistent problem for the Gold Rush miners, who passed through and occupied the same areas.

A high cost for a small profit

The Hudson's Bay Company fur brigades of 1832-33 returned a modest profit, but at a very high cost. Certainly there was no intent to spread disease as the HBC trappers were generally married to, or traveling with, native women; and native trappers were usually included in the parties. The HBC traders, contract workers (*engages*) and freemen worked and traded with natives throughout their lives. If attacked or provoked they would fight, but unlike many of the American trappers they were not generally "Indian killers." Yet inadvertently the brigade under John Work became an agent of death through central and northern California and southern Oregon. They saw their impact on the way home but didn't realize the cause.

Work returned to Fort Vancouver in Fall 1833 *"I was reduced to a perfect skeleton and so much exhausted and debilitated I could scarcely walk*". Work probably never imagined that he and the HBC company brigades had caused this enormous death toll. It is a cautionary tale for us today, as we still see companies scrabbling for profit without counting the cost. The intermittent fever helped clear the way for the gold miners and settlers of California, "*the red race in the heart of California was so crippled it could offer but the shadow of opposition to the gold-mining flood which swept over it in 1849." (Cook,1955)*