

Ishi's story

On the morning of 29 August, 1911, two butchers at a slaughter house in Oroville were roused from their sleep by the urgent barking of dogs. Going outside to investigate, they saw in the early-morning light a figure, crouching in fear, against the fence of the livestock enclosure.

They called off the dogs and then, in some agitation, they rang the local sheriff, JB Webber, to inform him that a 'wild man' was on their premises. The sheriff arrived quickly, accompanied by his deputies and cautiously approached the huddled figure. Their guns were raised, but there was no need for such caution. The man made no attempt to evade capture and, without a struggle, quietly allowed them to handcuff him and lead him away.

The sheriff could immediately see that the man, a native American Indian, was exhausted and terrified. He soon realised that the man was unable to understand any English. The sheriff was uncertain what to do with his 'captive'; in the absence of a better option, he took him to the local county jail, imprisoning him in a cell for the insane. This was as much for the man's own safety as anything else: news of the 'wild man' in Oroville was spreading like wildfire and hoards of people were soon coming from far and wide to catch a glimpse of him.

So, who was this mysterious 'wild man'? His name was Ishi and he was the last native American Indian in northern California to have been living in the wild. He had spent his entire life in a tiny, fugitive group of fewer than 12 – the only surviving members of the Yahi tribe – practising their ancient way of life, in hiding. However, as time went by, the group was gradually depleted, succumbing to attack, old age and illness, leaving Ishi as the sole surviving member. He continued to live alone for a couple of years and then finally, having lost all hope, indifferent to whether he lived or died, he had begun an aimless, directionless journey, away from his ancestral homeland. After some days, in a state of grief and exhaustion, he found himself 40 miles from home, at

the slaughter house in Oroville. He lay down, unable to go any further. Ishi was a man with no family, friends or community, lost beyond the borders of his tribal territory. It was here that, having been discovered by the butchers, Ishi was confronted with 20th-century western culture for the very first time.