

The Long View

The Modoc—California's obscure, timeless northeastern corner.

Words and photos by Larry Turner.



It seems left behind from the rest of California and the people of the Modoc are quite satisfied with that. “We don’t want to belong to the rat race of most of California,” says lifelong Modoc County resident Dave Krizo. “We’re quite fine in our happy isolation from the remainder of the state.”

Krizo and his wife, Jacqui, live on the western edge of the county, adjacent to Lava Beds National Monument. They are farmers and gardeners. They are the largest organic farmers of horseradish in America. He has a master’s in French literature. He speaks the language fluently and is an ardent reader of French novels. “I was

offered a professorship to teach French at Adams State, but declined because I didn’t want to leave the Modoc and the family farm.” It was the product of hard work by his WWII father, Phil (a pilot), and mother, Barb. They drew a homestead in a lottery after the war.

The Krizos are just one of many Modoc residents who have a lifelong connection to this unique land and landscape that occupies the far northeastern corner of California, bordered by Oregon and Nevada. Shaped like a rectangle, Modoc County is vast, varied and beautiful. It is the only county in California without a traffic signal and its third least-populated county (less

than 10,000 residents), set on 4,000-plus square miles. The county’s slogan, “Where the West Still Lives,” still rings true. Agriculture is its second leading producer.

The county was named after the Modoc people, indigenous to the area near present-day Tulelake, Lava Beds National Monument, Clear Lake, Willow Creek and Lost River. Captain Jack was the tribal chief, leading 52 warriors in battle against 1,000 U.S. cavalymen. The 1872 Modoc War was one of the last Indian wars in the United States, and the only Indian war to claim a general—Gen. Edward Canby, killed by Captain Jack.

The county is abundant with space



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Judy Cockrell of the Cockrell Ranch (located on the edge of Lake City) secures a parameter as cattle are checked in a summer pasture. ► Surprise Valley as viewed from the summit of Bidwell Mountain. ► Ringneck pheasant in Tulelake National Wildlife Refuge. ► Friends Michelle Grove and Carol Maita in downtown Cedarville after wrapping up a cattle drive. They celebrated the drive's end with a milkshake.





ABOVE: The John Carey family moves their stock from the summer range to winter range near Fort Bidwell.



LEFT: Modoc County 4-H'ers Callie Jane Crawford, Alicia Fanning and Katelyn Harris at the annual Tulelake-Butte Valley Fair.

BELOW: On the edge of Cedarville, this sign says it all.



(two people per square mile), wildlife (large populations of deer, elk, antelope, waterfowl, mountain lions, and bobcats), and physical beauty. Ranchers love the Modoc because it is rich with native grazing, planted grazing, and dryland and watered crops, including alfalfa, grains and grasses (native and introduced). It is a land of forests, wetlands, lakes and small streams.

Alturas is the county seat and the most populated town in the Modoc. Many large and medium-sized ranches surround it. East from Alturas and across the Warner Mountains is a gem aptly named Surprise Valley. Ranching is the main occupation in this uniquely beautiful valley, home to the small towns of Cedarville, Eagleville, Lake City and Fort Bidwell. At the summit of Warner Pass is a sign, "The Great Basin Begins Here." Surprise Valley is one of the ancestral homes of the Paiutes. There is a reservation in both Fort Bidwell and Cedarville. Surprise Valley and Modoc County border Nevada on the east. Outside of Surprise Valley heading east is a sign that says, "No Services Next 100 Miles." Make sure that your gas tank is full...those are mainly dirt miles!

The southern route of the Oregon Trail crosses Modoc County and enters Oregon near Malin. This is the trail that led to the settlement of non-First Americans in the area. It is the first immigrant trail founded west to east (in 1846). Cattle first came to the Modoc via Rogue Valley, Ore.

Geri Byrne, a 12-year veteran Modoc County supervisor for District 5, glows when asked about her home county. "I love the wide open spaces of Modoc County, the friendly people, and the fact that you not only know your neighbors, even if the closest one is two miles away, but they are there for you when you need help. Everyone waves when you meet them on the road. When we had the National Sheepdog Finals here, I was proud of how our locals treated visitors, even going so far as to lend a vehicle to someone whose vehicle broke down."

Geri and her late husband, Dan, once were partners in the legendary Pitchfork Ranch. When Dan passed away, Geri sold their holdings to his brother, Mike. "I still live on the ranch and occasionally help out. I helped vaccinate calves at Steele Swamp on Thursday and Friday and I am helping preg check heifers today." Geri has hosted the National Sheepdog Finals seven times, and hopes to bring it back to Alturas in



ABOVE: A fresh winter snow in Modoc County, looking toward Mount Shasta in Northern California.



LEFT: Downtown Cedarville, California, the heart of Surprise Valley.

2025. Each year, she puts on seven sheep-dog competitions and travels across the West to compete in others.

“This county is perfect for ranching and farming,” Geri says. “It is a way of life second to none. I never tire of the long view and beauty of the Modoc.” ■

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