



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Ishi in Two Worlds

This is Mill Creek, in Northern California. It rises on Mt. Lassen and winds through the foothills of the Cascade Mountains before joining the Sacramento River. The summer sun makes these foothills blazing hot; the winter rains make them cold and wet. Long ago, before there was anyone to remember, the hawk and the deer lived here undisturbed. And, for a thousand years after that, these were the hills of the Yahi Indians, Ishi's people.

This was the first world of Ishi. He and his people lived by hunting and fishing. Salmon filled their streams in the spring and fall. From the groves of black and white oaks, they gathered acorns in the fall. These they ground to make mush and bread. They sheltered in caves and warm houses roofed with earth-covered logs in the winter and under cut boughs in the summer. Summer followed winter, and winter followed summer, in unending progression. Life continued as it always had.

But suddenly time had meaning: gold at Sutter's mill, gold in the foothills. Prospectors poured across the mountains on the Lassen Trail, between Mill Creek and Deer Creek, through the heart of the Yahi hills. The miners and vigilantes drove off the Indians from the salmon creeks; drove off the Indians from the sites of towns. The Yahi fought back, more than any other California tribe, but the fight was unequal.

In 1850, three to four hundred Indians lived along Mill Creek and Deer Creek; 22 years later, none were known to be living. For every white person killed, 30 to 50 Indians died. Here at Kingsley Cave, the last big massacre took place. More than 30 Indian men, women, and children were slaughtered by four ranchers with guns.

By 1872, there was quiet in the hills. The Yahi were thought to be entirely exterminated, but a remnant of the tribe, maybe no more than a dozen persons, had concealed themselves in the canyons, and held out against civilization for 25 years longer than Geronimo's famous band of Apaches.

For most of this time, no white man saw any trace of the Indians. For weeks on end, they never left a footprint on the ground. When they traveled, they stepped from rock to rock, or followed the creek beds, or crawled passages in the brush too small for a deer to get through. They kept close watch on the trails, but never showed themselves.

In the valley, mining gave over to agriculture, as life became more settled. Occasionally, there were rumors of Indians in the hills, but nothing was known for certain. One evening, however, two surveyors, returning to camp, suddenly came upon an Indian spearing salmon from a rock. The surveyors retreated, but returned next day to discover the fisherman's tiny village of four

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people. The three who could, fled as the men arrived, leaving only an aged woman too sick to walk, hidden under some skins. The men took all the furs, baskets, bows, and food they could find and left. When one of them returned the following morning, the village was deserted.

For three years, nothing. Then, August 29, 1911, a middle-aged Indian, gaunt from hunger, was discovered in a corral near Oroville by Ad Kessler. The Indian was doing no harm, and Kessler indicated he could leave. The Indian looked back at the hills, and indicated he would stay. Kessler was perplexed and sent for help; the Indian apprehensive, but firm. When the sheriff arrived it was decided, for lack of a better place, to lodge the Indian in the town jail, and from there the news spread.

Reading the papers in San Francisco were Professor Kroeber, Head of the Department of Anthropology of the University of California, and Professor Waterman, also an anthropologist. With a list of related Indian words, Waterman went to Oroville and became the first to talk a little with the man who said that he was, indeed, the last survivor of the Yahi. Waterman made arrangements for the Indian to live at the University, and the station was jammed as they left for San Francisco.

The Museum of Anthropology was to be the Indian's home, and it was here he received the name by which we know him. At this time he was referred to only as The Wild Man, or The Mysterious Indian. By tradition, no California Indian told his name to strangers, or ever used it in conversation. But this was America now, and a name was necessary. Professor Kroeber, who from now on would be the Indian's Chief, decided on Ishi, which means, "man" in Yahi. Ishi accepted his new name so completely that after he learned it, and learned to write it, he was never again heard to say it out loud.

The second world of Ishi, the San Francisco of 1911, was a strange place for a middle-aged man from the woods. What was most amazing were the numbers of people. At the theater, for instance, it was the audience that interested him. Even as a child, he had probably never seen more than 50 people at once.

There were many gadgets to surprise and please. Doorknobs, safety pins, and typewriters he regarded with a quiet hilarity. Running water proved the white man was very, very clever. He liked and learned to use skillfully, saw, hammer, hatchet, and knife. He rarely used level or square, being accustomed to measure according to some body dimension, such as the length from fingertip to elbow. But matches and glue he rated as two of the white man's most important achievements. Matches permitted one to avoid the tedium of working a fire drill, and glue could be used for many things, such as feathering arrows, and joining the sinews of a bowstring.

Ishi enjoyed life in the museum, where he was no longer alone, and where he was constantly asked about the Yahi skills. Demonstrating the hand-twirled fire drill was hard work; building a Yahi summerhouse was easier. On the newly invented phonograph, he recorded many of his songs and chants, including this gambling song.

One day, while practicing with the bow and arrow, he met Dr. Pope of the University's Medical School. Ishi taught "Popey," as he called him, how to shoot and the two became close friends.

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They spent much time together comparing the short hunter's bow of the Yahi with the longbow of the English.

Ishi made a strong impression on those who met him. With good humor, he played the noble savage for a local reporter and even received a proposal of marriage. Said Kroeber, who saw Ishi every day, "He was the most patient man I ever knew. I mean, he had mastered the philosophy of patience, without trace of either self-pity or bitterness to dull the purity of his cheerful enduringness."

In the spring of 1914, Kroeber, Waterman, Pope, and Ishi decided to take a camping trip to Deer and Mill Creeks, so that Ishi could show them where and how he and his tribe actually lived. The expedition hired horses at the Apperson Ranch. Mr. Apperson had never seen Ishi, but in the old days Ishi had probably raided Apperson's storehouses and had seen him, from hiding, many times.

At first, Ishi was nervous about returning to his canyons and the painful memories of his dead family and friends, but in the familiar woods, he soon became at ease, swimming again in the cold creeks and guiding Pope's son through the rushing water by letting the boy hold onto his long hair.

But it was a time for work also. For the professors, Ishi demonstrated the different ways of using the bow and arrow, while keeping an eye out for their camera, and how to call rabbits with a kissing sound. He went hunting with Dr. Pope and on the third day shot a deer with flint-pointed arrows and a bow he had made at the University. He skinned the deer with a green bottle-glass knife he had also made. He hardened and straightened a fire drill, and then made fire by this difficult method, twirling the drilling stick between his palms until a curl of smoke rose from the dry tinder, then blowing on the tinder to get a flame.

He began work on a new bow, a task of many weeks, by roughing out the piece of mountain Juniper until it was smooth and symmetrical. He made a salmon spear, first binding the two prongs to the end of the shaft, then tying the toggles, or hooks, to the prongs by a long string. When the salmon is speared, the toggles stay in the fish, though still tied to the spear. He swam with the spear and repeated what he had been doing when the surveyors came upon him, on that evening years ago.

He showed the men minutely over the territory, three miles long and half a mile wide, where four aging people had lived for more than a dozen years as the last of the Yahi. And at night, under the new moon, whose perfect arc resembles the fully drawn bow of the Yahi hunter, Ishi entertained his friends with tales and legends from the old days.

After a month in the country, the expedition returned to San Francisco. Ishi, now in his middle fifties, continued to live at the museum, and it was here, attended by Dr. Pope, that on March 25, 1916 he died of Tuberculosis.

"For the actual shaping of the arrow or spear point, Ishi used a flint plate, pressing upon the lower edge of the unworked piece, evenly, and with increasing force downward and outward, in a scarcely perceptible motion. For a moment nothing visible happens; then, with an almost inaudible click, a minute fragment of the flint detaches itself . . ."

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The Yahi are gone; their arts and crafts are found only in museum cases.

The deer and the hawk live almost undisturbed in the hills that no one now calls home. What does Ishi mean to us today? No more than what we remember of him. In a letter written after his death Pope put his own memory of Ishi into these words: "And so, stoic and unafraid, departed the last wild Indian of America. He closes a chapter in history. He looked upon us as sophisticated children, smart but not wise. We knew many things, and much that is false. He knew Nature, which is always true. His were the qualities of character that last forever. He was kind, he had courage and self-restraint, and though all had been taken from him, there was no bitterness in his heart. His soul was that of a child; his mind that of a philosopher."

Running Time: 19 minutes
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