

# Olive Oatman **WHITE MOHAVE**



COURTESY MARGOT MIFFLIN

Engraving of Olive Oatman, by Charles and Arthur Nahl, from *Life Among the Indians: Being an Interesting Narrative of the Captivity of the Oatman Girls*, 1857.

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today Arizona, who bludgeoned them with clubs, sparing only Olive and her eight year-old sister, Mary Ann, whom they kept as slaves for a year. In 1852, they were adopted into the family of a Mohave named Espaniole, whose 19-year-old daughter had first noticed the dejected sisters on a trading run with the Yavapais and asked her father to liberate them.

The Mohave, some 4,000 strong, lived in villages scattered up and down the Colorado River, thus their name, Aha Macav ("Along the River"). Nicknamed the American Nile because it flooded its channel from May to mid-summer as the snow melted in the Rockies and thundered down to the Gulf of Mexico, the river was the heart of Mohave life. The Mohave swam in its currents and planted on its banks. In a good year, when the high tide subsided, the residual silt fertilized the seeds they sowed in the riverbed and the blistering sun made the crops sprout and ripen supernaturally fast. They planted wheat in the fall and corn in the spring, along with beans, pumpkins, watermelon, cantaloupe and wild herbs.

In 1776, when father Francisco Garces of Spain arrived, tribal leaders guided him across the desert to the Pacific coast. Garces said the Mohave—who had probably inhabited the region for at least a thousand years—were of "gentle and sincere character" and claimed he'd never met Indians who talked more, though their exchanges

Olive Oatman left her home as teenager in Illinois on a Mormon wagon train in 1851, lost most of her family in a bloody Indian massacre, lived among two different tribes over the course of five years, and was eventually ransomed back bearing a secret she never revealed: she didn't want to go home. Oatman had crossed over and become, in the parlance of the day, a white Indian, fully acculturated to the Mohaves who raised her from the ages of 14-19. Her story has since become a classic of captivity literature, but its most interesting feature—the glimpse it affords of the Mohave in their last decade of sovereignty and independence—is often overlooked.

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Mohave Indians by H. B. Mollhausen, c. 1854.

didn't lead to many conversions. They had no gods or religious ceremonies, but their central spirit was Matavilya, a being who had performed a great service (killing a sea monster named Sky Rattlesnake) and flown away. Dreams and legends were the source of wisdom and information, providing models for behavior and decision-making, and they were all traced back to Matavilya.

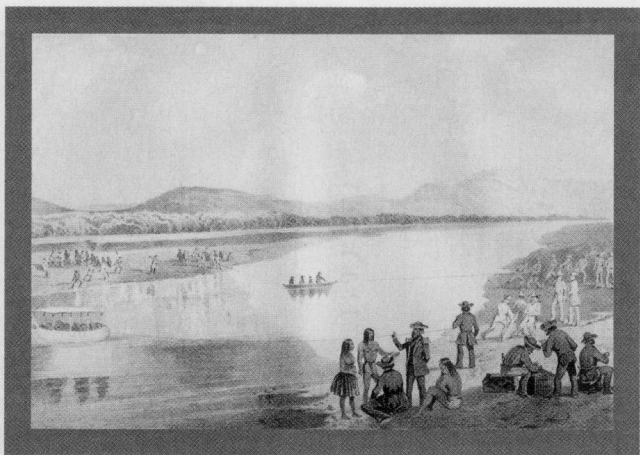
By all subsequent accounts, from explorers who passed through the valley to anthropologists who studied the dwindling tribe in the early 20th century, the Mohave, especially the men, were beautiful. Often six feet tall, they were described variously as athletic, majestic, Herculean, and as one of the Smithsonian Institution's first ethnographers put it, "as fine a race of men physically, perhaps, as there is in existence." They painted their faces coal-black with a red streak from the hairline to the chin and were known for their tattooing and face painting. The men carried bows and feathered arrows, spears and clubs and, in cold weather, firebrands. The women wore willow bark skirts that fell to the knees and tied at the waist. Both sexes went barefoot.

Though historians have cast the Oatman girls as captives of the Mohave, historical evidence confirms that they were fully

integrated into the tribe. They were given a clan name, Oach—something never conferred on captives taken at war—along with traditional tribal tattoos intended to ensure their passage in to the Mohave afterlife. Using a cactus thorn, Olive wrote, they "pricked the skin in small regular rows on our chins with a very sharp stick, until they bled freely. They then dipped these same sticks in the juice of a certain weed that grew on the banks of the river, and then in the powder of a blue stone that was to be found in low water..." The stone was burned, then pulverized, then applied to the pinprick patterns that had been etched into their faces.

If the girls' tattoos marked their first major step toward assimilation, a historic visit from a U.S. military entourage confirmed that they stayed with the tribe voluntarily. When Lieutenant Amiel Weeks Whipple arrived in the winter of 1854 with over 100 men to map a railroad route from the Mississippi to the Pacific, he spent weeks trading and carousing with groups of as many as 600 Indians in a single day. During that time, the Oatmans never sought help from the white men who could have taken them from the valley.

Tragedy wove Olive deeper into the fabric of Mohave culture. In 1855, a famine struck, killing Mary Ann. Olive's



Mohave Indians on the Colorado River in 1854 by J.J. Young, based on a sketch by A.H. Campbell.

Mohave mother, Aespaneo, cried helplessly at Mary Ann's death-bed as Olive saw her last tie to her biological family severed—or so she thought. Olive's older brother, Lorenzo, left for dead during the Oatman massacre, had miraculously made his way back to safety and had been trying to locate his sisters. In 1856, Olive was ransomed back under threat of war, and returned. Tanned, tattooed and wearing only a bark skirt, she was hardly recognizable as a white woman when she was delivered at Fort Yuma, where she fell to her knees and cried into her hands.

Once repatriated, Oatman was forced to renounce the Mohaves in order to save face in the white culture she had re-entered. Less than a year after her return, she met a Methodist clergyman, Royal B. Stratton, who wrote her biography, *Life Among the Indians: Being an Interesting Narrative of the Captivity of the Oatman Girls*, which became a national bestseller and made her famous. For nearly a decade, Olive promoted the book through public lectures in which she told spellbound audiences about her life as a Mohave, emphasizing the “obscurity, vulgarity and grossness” of Indians even as she hinted at her loving relationship with her Mohave family.

Meanwhile, the Mohave culture she knew so well was collapsing as a result of white incursions into their valley. The tribe's conflicts with emigrant parties triggered military retaliation and sowed dissent among tribal leaders, who were divided about whether and how to compromise with white authorities. In 1865, half the tribe moved to a reservation near Parker, Arizona. The others stayed near Needles, California. To this day, the tribe is divided not only geographically, but also politically. Only about 1000 Mohaves survive, and though some 2600 people claim Mohave ancestry.

Olive married a wealthy banker, lived a comfortable life in Sherman, Texas, adopted a child, and died quietly in 1902. Dramatic as her saga was, it's a mere footnote in Mohave history, which is rich in homegrown mythic narrative and military legend. But Olive's memories of her life as a Mohave are among the few documentary portraits of this vibrant, self-sufficient nation that thrived on the Colorado before it was all but purged from national memory. —

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