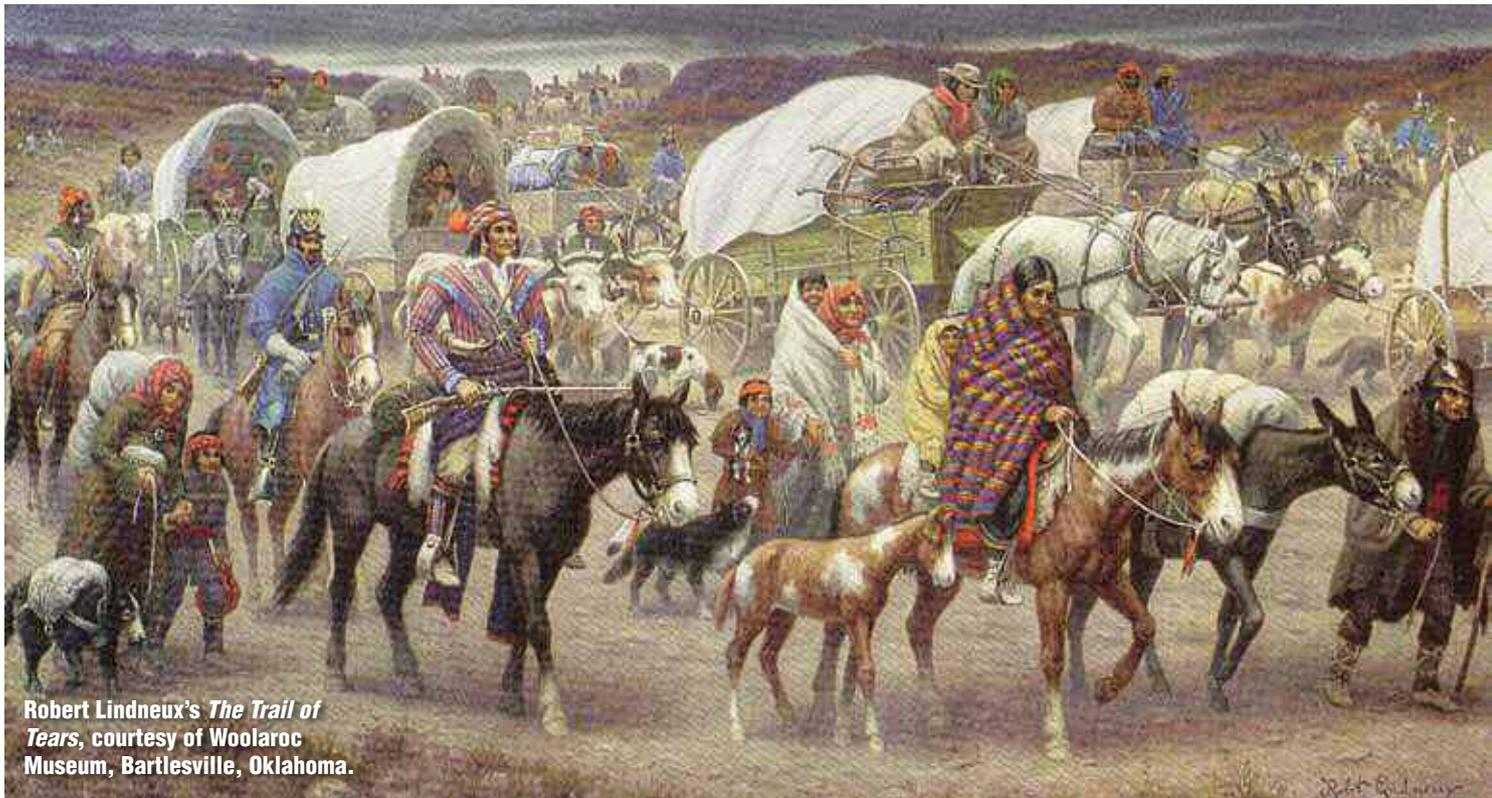


Trail of Tears and Blessings

Reneging on its treaties, the U.S. government forced the “Five Civilized Tribes” in the East to move to Indian Territory in Oklahoma, causing death, destruction – and faith in God.



Robert Lindneux's *The Trail of Tears*, courtesy of Woolaroc Museum, Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

by John J. Dwyer

This article contains true events and events based on truth, and features a composite American Indian narrator of, and participant in, the 1830s Indian Removal or Trail of Tears. This style was chosen in order to best capture not only the deeds and words of both real characters and those based on the historical record, but the first-person experience, emotion, lessons, and even valor of the epic saga. We focus here on the Cherokee Trail of Tears. The more general Trail(s) of Tears lasted more than a decade, from approximately 1831-1842; involved

John J. Dwyer is author of The War Between the States: America's Uncivil War and the upcoming The Oklahomans: The Story of Oklahoma and Its People. He teaches history and ethics at Southern Nazarene University in Oklahoma City.

all the “Five Civilized Tribes,” including the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole, upwards of 75,000 souls; and cost the lives of thousands of those, mostly women, children, and the aged.

Indian removal occurred for the benefit of an expanding American nation and the supposed protection of the natives themselves, despite the successful transition by many of them to the Western cultural practices of the United States. The U.S. government determined that the Indians residing in southeastern states must move to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Amidst much debate, intra-tribal division, bitterness, and even wars with both themselves and the United States, the Five Civilized Tribes reluctantly signed treaties agreeing to abandon their ancient homelands and move westward. They received financial

The 1830s Indian Removal of the Five Civilized Tribes from the southeastern states cost thousands of native lives before, during, and after the journey.

remuneration for their losses, travel, and future needs; free land at their destination; and the promise of perpetual ownership and sovereignty.

My name is not important, but the deeds I saw and the people who accomplished them are. From the time the whites settled in America in the early 1600s, the destiny of us American Indians was linked to theirs. We Cherokee and other tribes fought against them in the Yamasee War and the American Revolution. We fought with them against the British in the War of 1812. We traded with them, many of our women married

their men, and we warily co-existed with them, we in our areas, they in theirs.

But by the early 1800s, so many of them and their black slaves came that they wanted all the land, at least all of it east of the Mississippi River. President Thomas Jefferson called us natives “equal in mind and body” to the white man, but said our environment had slowed our advancement as a people. He did not believe our differing cultures, histories, religions, practices, and races could co-exist. He feared that disease, war, and dissipation would annihilate us Indians. Already, many whites had snuck in illegally to sell liquor to our people, and that horrid practice alone nearly destroyed us. To “remove beyond the Mississippi” and the harmful influences of the whites to lands forever our own would be our happiest course, Jefferson said. Subsequent presidents expounded upon that plan, which by the 1830s included paying us millions of dollars in cash for our ancestral southeastern homeland — and those of the other great “Five Civilized Tribes,” the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole — supplies, travel expenses, and perpetual annuities.

Several thousand of us Cherokee moved west to the Arkansas Territory from the 1790s to the 1820s, but the mass of our people and those of the other more “advanced” American tribes remained in the southeast. We did not want charity, though, and we set about learning, mastering, and living the white man’s ways. This included his classical-Western educational system; social practices such as monogamous marriage, advanced medicine and health principles, reading and writing, and black slavery; political institutions and republican rule of law; agrarian and other free market business practices; and most of all his Christian religion.

We did not forget our heritage; we did not lose our pride in our people; and we recognized the shortcomings of the growing giant of European America. But we saw the benefits of those ways too, and many of us be-

lieved not that the white man himself created them, but that, sort of like Jefferson said, his civilization had been growing for a long time and God seemed to have used him to combine and improve the best ways of all the world’s cultures, make them his own, and spread them. Some of my native brethren, yet darkened in mind and spirit and not knowing the one true God, would count me an infidel and traitor for believing such things.

Land and Gold

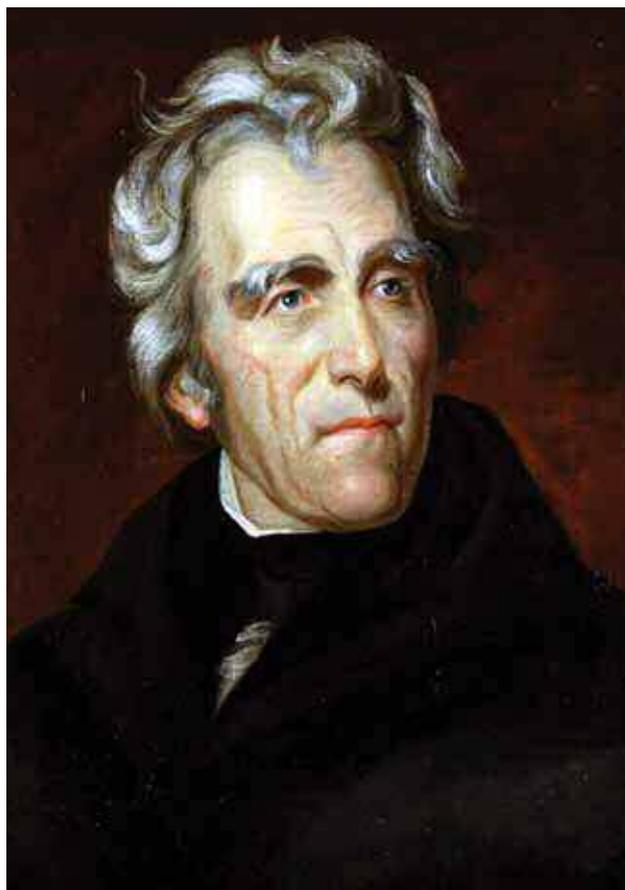
Even as Sequoyah created our own Cherokee alphabet, however, and we built great plantations from which we and our slaves pulled the bounty of the earth to help feed and supply America and other nations, and even as we sent our children to the best universities in the North and East and they married some of the most attractive and intelligent whites, more and more whites came to America from their

own troubled lands in Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. It is true, many of them were hard workers trying to make a better life for themselves and their children than they could have had back in their old countries, and they built America, too. But always they needed more land, and in north Georgia where we lived, they wanted a lot more land — our land.

Hardly anyone remembers that some of those old states, including Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas, once stretched from the Atlantic to the Great River, the Mississippi. Then smaller states complained about the large states in Congress and it was decided to chop up those big states. So the Compact of 1802 carved Alabama and Mississippi out of Georgia. What is really forgotten is that the U.S. government assured whites in Georgia in that decades-old agreement that it would purchase the land of all the Cherokee and other Indians who lived in what remained of the state in order to move us west to Jefferson’s “Indian Territory,” as John C. Calhoun baptized it. No Cherokee ever agreed to that sorry deal.

In 1828, we wrote our own Cherokee Constitution — the other “civilized” tribes did too, except for the Seminoles — and created our own branches of government, laws, and political districts, based on how the American states and counties did. Then in 1829, folks discovered the gold that God or the devil had filled north Georgia with. People poured into our homeland like never before. And they set about pushing us out. It is probably no coincidence that the next year the U.S. Congress, pressured by President Andrew Jackson and the American public, passed the Indian Removal Act, ordering all natives to be moved west of the Mississippi.

Then in 1831, Georgia passed a law requiring that whites on our lands, specifically our Christian missionaries, swear an oath of loyalty to the state of Georgia, which Presbyterian ministers Samuel Worcester and Elizur Butler refused to do. A lot



Indian killer: President Andrew Jackson, famed general in the War of 1812 and the Creek Wars, ignored Supreme Court rulings supporting Indian lands and rights, and spearheaded removal of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes from their southeastern homelands.

of folks of this “Christian nation” didn’t like the way faithful men and women of God lived among us, served us, taught us, and defended our rights when politicians, soldiers, wealthy people, common folks, and especially that cursed Georgia Guard — created by the state legislature mainly to move us out of Georgia — wouldn’t. We knew that the oath the ministers had to sign was meant to help break the treaty between us and the United States that allowed us to live undisturbed on our own land.

So the U.S. Army and the Georgia Guard shackled these godly men with horses’ trace chains around their necks, and, as John Ridge described it, dragged them on their “bleeding feet through the rough and tangled forest, over brake and bush and bog and fen, at the point of a bayonet, and even in sickness,” while their guards rode horseback. Then Georgia convicted those white pastors who helped us and sentenced them to four years of hard labor in prison.

Sam Worcester spent over a year in prison away from his family. During that time, his baby died and his wife nearly did. But that didn’t stop him, even though I saw him and knew his heart was hurting. He kept helping us, still leading his mission’s work from prison. He kept advising our fellow tribesman Elias Boudinot (more about him later) about editing the *Cherokee Phoenix* newspaper, the first native publication in the world, and Elias kept helping him with his translations into our language of the New Testament, hymns, and other Christian literature. Morning and evening, he and Butler preached, loved, and helped the real criminals in their prison. The inmates flocked to them. After I visited him and he saw how upset I was, that I was ready to go back on the warpath against the whites like the old days, he wrote me a letter that included these words:

Then in 1829, folks discovered the gold that God or the devil had filled north Georgia with. People poured into our homeland like never before. And they set about pushing us out.



Redistributing land: A series of Georgia land lotteries, including one following the discovery of gold, distributed the homelands of the Cherokee and Creek tribes to white settlers.

Let my name be sounded abroad as a weak, misguided enthusiast, yet a sincere lover of Jesus, *anything* consistent with sincere devotion to the cause of the Redeemer, rather than told with the highest commendation man can bestow, and yet withhold the reputation of being a servant of Christ. Yet after all, it is a light thing to be judged of man’s judgment. We stand or fall at a higher tribunal.

Worcester also took Georgia to court over his right to minister to us on our own land. *Worcester v. Georgia* went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. And you know what Chief Justice John Marshall wrote in his 1832 majority verdict? Bury your Georgia law, leave the missionaries alone, and let them do what they and the Cherokee want in their own country! Rev. Worcester, he was a hero to our people. And so was Justice Marshall. But Georgia kept Worcester and Butler in prison. And President Jackson said, “Justice Marshall has issued his verdict; now let him enforce it if he can.” Or words to that effect. Guess “Old Hickory” forgot that day at Horseshoe Bend when Cherokees helped him beat the Redcoats and the Red Stick Creek in the battle that cleared Alabama for American settlement.

Guess he forgot when he was down on the field with a wound and I saved his life. If I had known then what I do now, I would’ve killed him myself that day at the Horseshoe.

On top of all that, Georgia held a land lottery, with the full support of the Jackson administration, and gave away our land to settlers. One day a nice young pair of white newlyweds showed up at my house with an official property deed and seemed confused we were even there. Within a few days, my wife and I were staying at Sam Worcester’s little place. Then another white family showed up and took that house, too. It wasn’t long before thousands of us were camping out in the open fields and forests, surrounded by what possessions we could bring with us.

But I had been a Christian longer now than not, and I had learned that blessing often comes in the middle of hardship and injustice. Up till then, us Cherokee hadn’t really favored Worcester or the other missionaries. When we saw what they did, what they suffered, and realized it was all for us — that they didn’t have to do any of it — well, our mistrust just melted away. Ever after, we have been fertile ground for the Christian gospel, and a lot of our own have risen up as preachers, elders, deacons, missionaries, and faithful church folk, too. Following Christ likely saved our people from total destruction.

Tribal Division

I can see now it was only a matter of time till we had to leave our homeland. The American people pushed it, which led to many awful effects on our tribe. First, we were stirred up and plenty scared of what was going to happen. The Americans had beaten the British, who had the strongest army on Earth, twice, so we knew we didn't have a chance in a fight with them. More of our people commenced to drinking the liquor white men were selling to them, and that was beginning to cause crime among our people and to destroy many of us. And sad to say, these actions began turning members of our own tribes against one another like never before. Some of us said, "Let's fight the white man." Many said, "No, let's just ignore him and stay where we are." Others said, "Let's make a treaty with him so we can stay." Some began to say, "Perhaps we should consider going west, for the sake of our children and grandchildren."

I was so angry with that last group, I was ready to do to some of them what I felt like doing to Andy "By God" Jackson. Especially Buck Watie. I watched that boy grow up, and he was one of the finest, smartest, kindest men I ever knew. The first president of the Continental Congress was named Elias Boudinot, and he was so impressed with Buck that he sponsored him to attend the Cornwall Mission School in Massachusetts, a fine university. Buck became a leader there, like everywhere else he went, and he took Boudinot's

name to honor him. He also won the hand of Harriet Gold, one of the most beautiful and pursued young women in New England, and from one of its most respected Puritan families. Winning her father's permission when nearly all Yankee society was a-roaring down on him for letting a "heathen" court his daughter was pretty impressive in itself.

When he came back to Cherokee country, the Cherokee Elias Boudinot and Sam Worcester started the *Phoenix* newspaper. Its columns alternated between English and Cherokee so all the people could read it. John Ross was our principal chief, and Elias was one of his most trusted advisors and friends. Boudinot, Ross, and Worcester used the *Phoenix* to help tighten our scattered people, promote a unified Cherokee nation, aid our success in white America, and spread Christianity among

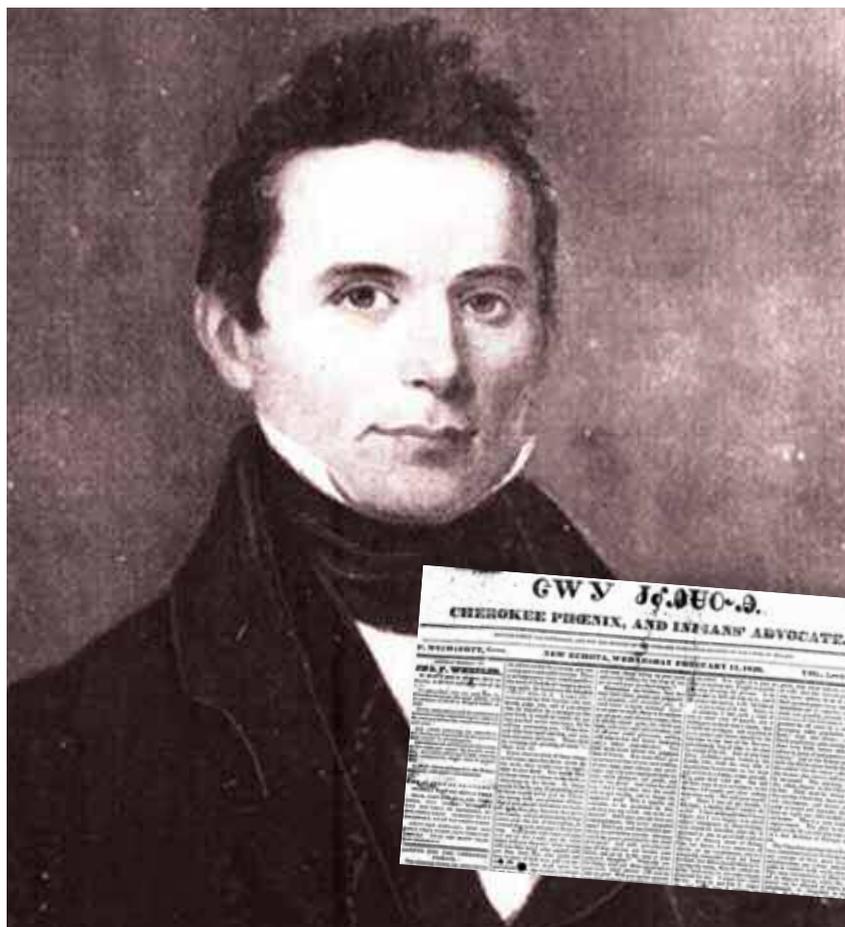
our people. Elias and Harriet, meanwhile, had six children. He also made a lot of folks angry, both white and Indian, when he began declaring very publicly the ills of alcohol for our people.

That anger was nothing, however, compared to what happened after President Jackson told Elias' esteemed uncle Major Ridge to his face we had to go West, and Elias began to say we should leave our country and move West like the white man said! Elias had always believed as strong as any Cherokee I ever knew that the ancient homeland was ours and that we should never leave. Many folks were angry with him and his cohorts: his little brother Stand Watie, Major Ridge, and Major's son John Ridge, who all advocated leaving. Talk began to spread about putting a *permanent* stop to the influence of Elias and the Ridges.

Chief Ross, on the other hand, spent most of his time up in Washington, D.C., appealing to congressmen, senators, and even presidents to honor Cherokee rights. As the pressure mounted on us to move, Ross stood like a granite boulder, refusing to be moved, refusing to be intimidated by America's mightiest leaders. We, the mass of the Cherokee, loved him for it.

Finally, being pressed from all sides, he agreed we would move if the U.S. Senate granted us \$5 million, transportation, supplies, annuities, and sweeping lands in Kansas and the Indian Territories. Then when the senators gave in, Ross changed his mind — and we loved him more, because we could stay on our land!

But then Elias Boudinot, Stand Watie, the Ridges, and some others we called the Treaty Party double-crossed us as 1835 ended, signing the Treaty of New Echota and selling



Becoming "civilized": Elias Boudinot, a brilliant Cherokee whose belief that the tribe must move West to survive cost him his life, and the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first American Indian publication, co-edited by him and white missionary Samuel Worcester. It featured alternating columns of Cherokee and English, and aimed to inform, unify, and strengthen the tribe.

So the U.S. Army and the Georgia Guard shackled these godly men with horses' trace chains around their necks, and, as John Ridge described it, dragged them on their "bleeding feet through the rough and tangled forest."

our land to the government without Chief Ross, or the majority of our tribe's support. The Treaty Party also agreed to go west. They did it even though they knew it meant the death penalty for them, according to tribal law, which Major Ridge helped write! What arrogant fools! Or at least I thought so at the time.

Death and Exile

Throughout 1836 and into 1837, whites robbed and beat Cherokees almost every day. Rich and poor alike were even murdered for money, land, or just pure hate. The Georgia Guard kicked the white Moravian missionaries out of their Spring Place Mission Station, where they had taught generations of Cherokee the schooling and religion of Jesus. Then the guards turned it into a saloon to sell the liquor that was already destroying so many natives and whites. Even John Ross barely escaped assassination.

Just before the Treaty Party left in 1837 to move to the new lands in the West, Elias' wife, Harriet, with her beautiful face and angelic manner, died. Something began to move in me after hearing Elias, left bereft with six children, weep, "It is beyond the power of language to express. When I think of my endeared companion — one who left her home and friends for me and suffered great loss for marrying an Indian, whose face I am never to see again in this world — it is more than human nature can bear." I guess the Good Book and preacher talk would call it

the Holy Spirit, but I started for the first time to regret my feelings — my hatred — for Elias and his kith and kin.

Later, some people would say the Treaty Party's journey west was easy, since it didn't feature all the horrors the rest of us faced later. But I remember how broken all their hearts were to leave. "It

is mournful to see how reluctantly these people go away," I heard one of the missionaries say to Elias and Stand. "Even the stoutest hearts are melting into tears when they turn their faces toward the setting sun." Then he put his hand on Elias' shoulder and added, "I am afraid this land will be dewed with a nation's tears — if not with its blood. You can see that Major Ridge is in a declining state because of it. Do you think he will even reach Arkansas?"



Protecting parishioners: Samuel Worcester, a white Presbyterian missionary who ministered to the Cherokee for decades in Tennessee, Georgia, and Indian Territory (Oklahoma), suffered brutal treatment and imprisonment for defending their interests.

Then I grew angry again with those brothers. "What is a man who will forsake his country in time of adversity?" I said to their face, "And what of the white man's mammon — as the Bible you preach calls it, Elias — that you took? Such a man is no more than a traitor and should be shunned as such!"

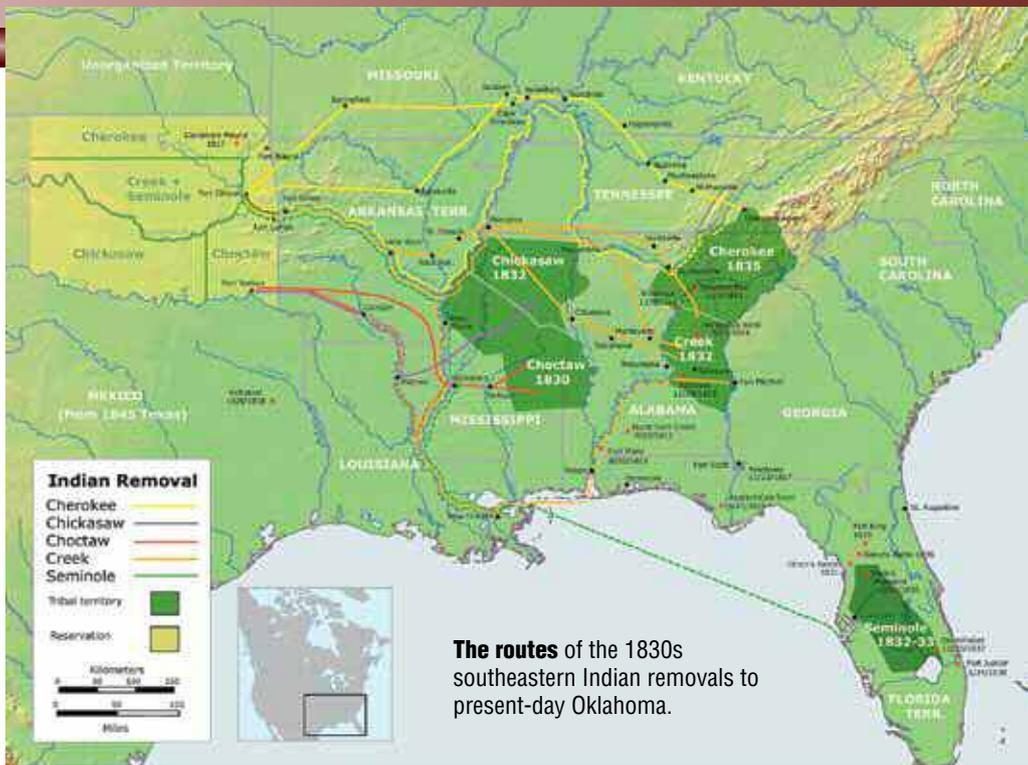
Stand bristled with anger, but Elias shook his head at him, then looked me in the eye. "I have not even the 'mammon' to purchase a shack in Indian Territory for the six children my wife bore me in nine years before the seventh killed her in childbirth," he said, his voice quiet but forged with iron. "But our chief demands ever-more-millions of dollars from the United States for our marble quarries, gold mines, and timber forests, which we don't even use, while vice and immorality ravage our people."

"Meanwhile," he continued, his eyes narrowing, "what about the spread of intemperance and the misery it has already caused, the bloody tragedies it regularly spawns, the frequent convictions and executions for murders, the tears and groans of the widows and fatherless, rendered homeless, naked and hungry, by this vile curse of our race? What more evidence do we need to prove our rapid descent to a general immorality and debasement than the slow but sure insinuation of the lower vices into our female population? Oh! It is heart-rending to think of these things — which few of our leaders do. My friend, can you deny any of it?"

I could not.

Then he shook his head as if to throw off a spell. "Old friend," he said to me with emotion, gripping me with a bear hug. As he walked away, he turned back. "Do you not wonder how many more would be leaving now if our chief were to quit promising them he will keep our country for us and instead lead in the crafting of a treaty that was inevitable unless he wanted to be swept en masse from our land by the bayonet and left with nothing?"

As he and his quiet little brother walked along the bank to their



We huddled together as best we could day and night for a week, then another. That is probably one reason disease took such a toll. By the time they herded us away for the one-thousand-mile journey to Indian Territory, dozens of people had already died just in our stockade.

Trail of Tears

Soldiers had told us we would ride boats to our new country and receive additional clothing and regular warm meals. Some of those boys in blue were good boys and really believed what they said, but it wasn't true. There weren't enough boats, so most of us went by foot. A few had horses and wagons of their own or had received U.S.

boat, I began to wonder if I had been very wrong about them.

Kidnapped and Imprisoned

After the Treaty Party folks and some others left, about 2,000 souls in all, we hunkered down in our country, finding what places we could to live. We were plenty scared, and the threats, bullying, beatings, and murders of our people continued. But Chief Ross was in Washington, and he kept promising us if we just held on and had faith, we would keep our homeland. Then in early 1838, General Winfield Scott arrived with several *thousand* federal troops. Folks said he was a gentlemanly fellow, but that he was there to make us leave. So when those soldiers began showing up armed wherever we were, our people, with many tears, began to depart. It was orderly, though, and most of the soldiers were kind and even helpful. Then the big news came that the chief was about to arrange a two-year extension in our country, during which time he was sure to work out a deal for us to stay permanently! So we rejoiced, quit packing, and stayed.

It was the most disastrous action we could have taken. Early one morning those thousands of bluecoats spread across our land like a vast pestilence. They stalked every cabin tucked away in a cove or aside a remote mountain stream, every house still occupied by Cherokee, bursting through doors with rifles loaded

and bayonets fixed. They were not warning, they were kidnapping every native they found and marching us with blows and oaths along a trail that led we knew not where.

They seized men as we worked in the fields or walked along the road. They snatched our women away from their wheels and our children from their play. Many of the latter wailed as the soldiers made no attempt to keep them with their mothers if they were not nearby.

They beat us as we walked and cursed at us if we asked questions, their sweat and spittle spraying us. "Are any of these men Christians?" I wondered as they shoved and raged at my dear old wife and knocked me down twice, first with a pistol, then with a rifle butt that broke my nose. I'll never forget looking back from the ridge near our encampment and seeing our shelter and belongings ablaze with fire, set by the rabble descending on the very heels of the soldiers. They loaded our few valuables onto wagons already piled high with the possessions of Cherokee. Others of these outlaws left with what few cattle and stock we and others still had.

They took us to enormous stockades built for us out in the open, which were growing very cold as November arrived. We had only the clothes on our backs when captured, and the prison camps offered no barrier to the biting elements other than their perimeter walls and our own bodies.

Army wagons. Most of the boat people wound up afoot anyhow when the boats sank or the draught got too shallow in the rivers and streams. Three hundred Creek drowned when one of their boats exploded on the Mississippi River.

We Cherokee came to call our journey "The Place Where We Cried." I've never talked of it before, and I only do so now because it has occurred to me during the winter of my life that what happened to us was terrible enough, nothing like it should ever happen again in America.

As we walked, we saw settlers digging up Cherokee graves and ransacking their valuables, even off the corpses. A 12-hour-long sleet storm slashed us before we had walked 20 miles. I forgot to mention we were tending our little granddaughter Leotie when the troops came. Her father, our son-in-law, was away on desperate council business, and her mother was busy with her other five young children. We were helping with Leotie partly because she was ill and her mother had not the strength to take care of her and all the others. Leotie means "wild flower" in our language, and even at just one year old, we could see she had a wild and free spirit and eyes that shone like onyx when she flashed them at her old grandpa, which she often did. So my wife and I took turns carrying little sick Leotie across Tennessee and into Kentucky.

Much of the food was so rancid — we

They took us to enormous stockades built for us out in the open, which were growing very cold as November arrived. We had only the clothes on our backs when captured, and the prison camps offered no barrier to the biting elements other than their perimeter walls.

heard later that was because of crooked government suppliers — my wife and I decided we should eat as little of it as possible, even if it increased our chances of starvation. As the days passed and the weather grew worse in December and January, many of the people dropped in the road and died. Much of the water was polluted, both in the streams and what the government gave us. Cholera, measles, dysentery, tuberculosis, and other diseases we didn't have names for swept through the tribe.

It seemed as though every time I thought I could go no further, Sunday would come. That was the day my distant cousin and the leader of our traveling contingent, Cherokee Chief and Baptist Pastor Jesse Bushyhead, conducted a church service, wherever we were. Other Cherokee pastors, from different denominations, did the same with the other groups. But I never met anyone who knew the Bible like Jesse. And he knew it not only in our language, he had translated whole sections of it from the white man's tongue into Cherokee himself! No wonder this man later served as chief justice of our national tribal court.

When we got to the Mississippi River in southern Illinois, it was frozen solid. One of the government commissioners told us it might be the hardest winter of the century. We had to wait in the bitter cold for the river to thaw enough to cross it by ferry. During the wait, white toughs murdered several Cherokee. By the time the ice broke, nearly a thousand of us were backed up, waiting to cross. Lots of whites were, too. And the ferry owner wouldn't take any of us till every last white had crossed. So we waited another week. In more than 80 winters, I hadn't been so cold as I was that month.

I can only imagine how cold our little

Leotie was. The morning we finally got to leave is when her brave little spirit, which had fought freezing wind, rain, snow, sleet, disease, and awful food and water for weeks, had been freed by our blessed Lord to return to Him, and she was no longer shivering and whimpering in our arms. So we stopped in that stranger-land and consigned her to the cold hard ground

with a simple Christian burial as the snowflakes covered us over. Then we continued on across the river with the multitude.

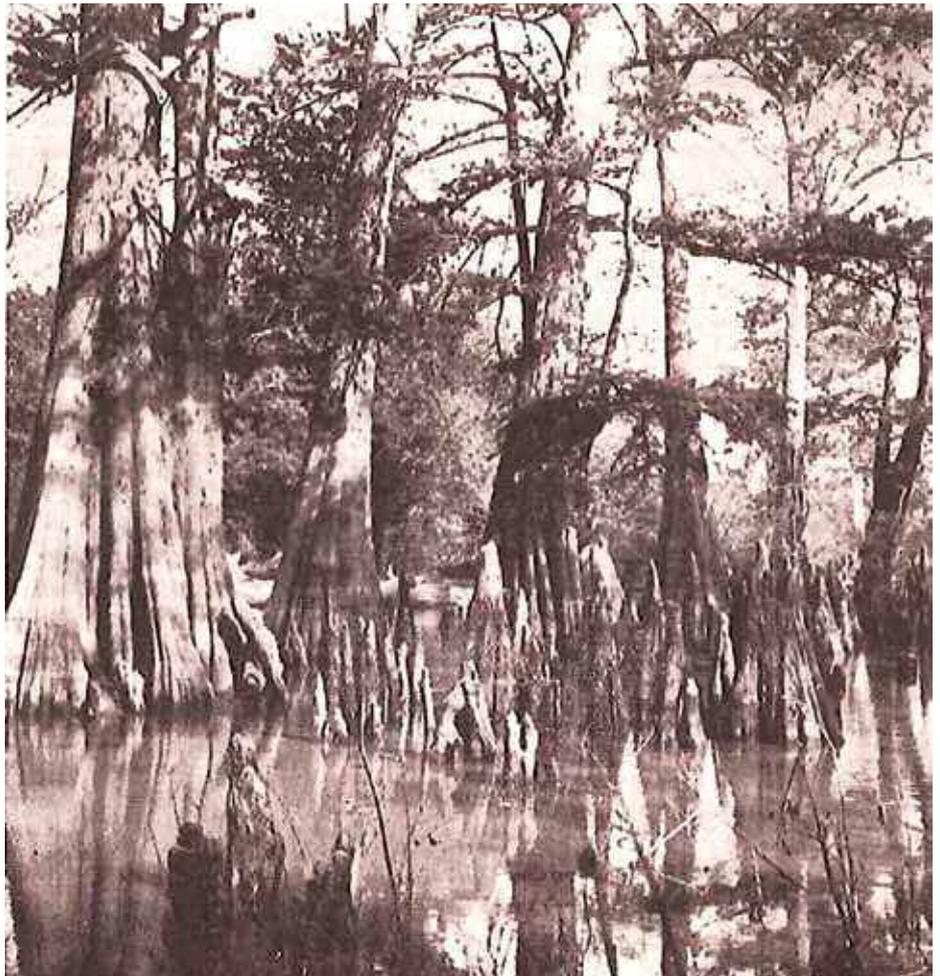
Grief wrung my heart. One of the soldiers we got to know back at the stockade — he was a tough fellow — wept like a child when he saw Leotie was gone. But other than a sigh, I heard not a sound from my wife even as she trudged through that freezing wilderness. That is why anyone

who knows our clan knows she is the granite foundation on which we are built. And that is why with her I can never be moved, even by ten thousand times ten thousand.

"We Keep Marchin'"

It stayed cold the whole time we walked through Missouri. Somewhere we came upon a Catholic Priest who had set up a way station by the side of the road. He gave water, food, and blankets to our women and children till they were all gone. There was something deep about this "Black Robe." Old Lone Raven, the oldest and wisest man in our village, spoke with him, which I had never seen him do with a white-eyes.

"Long time we travel on way to new land," Lone Raven said. "People feel bad when they leave Old Nation. Womens cry and make sad wails. Children cry and many men cry, and all look sad like when friends die, but they say nothing and just put heads



Wet walking: In Arkansas, Indians trudged through a freezing, 30-mile-long cypress swamp.

down and keep on go towards West. Many days pass and people die very much.”

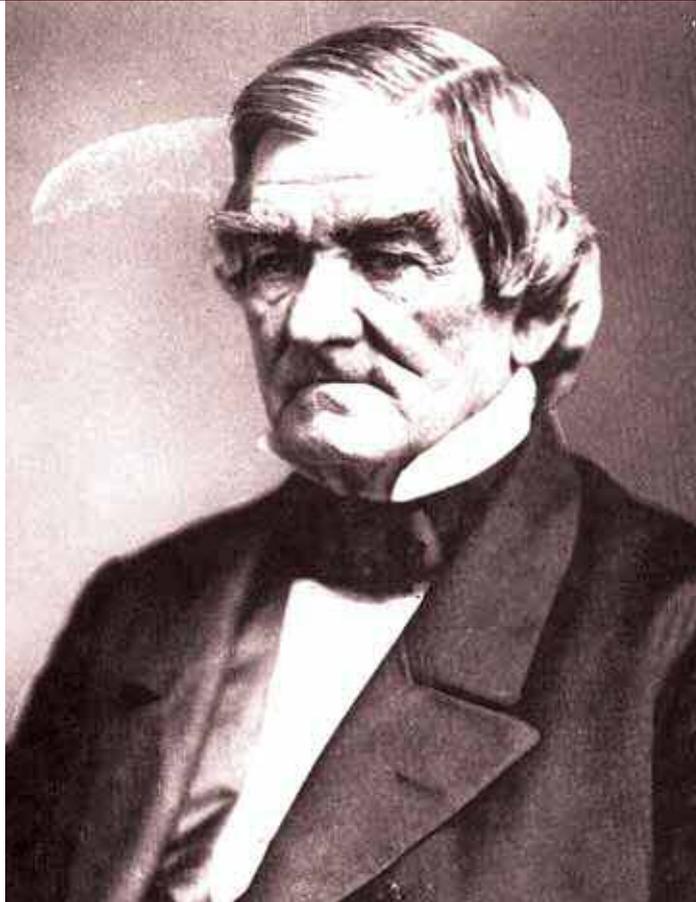
Old Lone Raven did not tell the Black Robe his mother had cried out on the trail three weeks before, spoke no more, then was buried as he and the rest of us moved on. Or that a week ago, his two sisters, two sons, and one daughter all died, on five consecutive days.

“Looks like maybe we all be dead before we get to new Indian country,” he told me, “but we keep marchin’ on.” Even as he spoke and we kept on, our ears filled again with the moans and sobs from wagons that carried a few of the children, the old folks, the sick, and the dying. Lone Raven bowed his head, shook it a bit, and said softly, “People sometimes say I look like I never smile, never laugh.”

Then he did something I shall never forget. He looked up toward the sky and began to sing “Amazing Grace” in our tongue, like Sam Worcester had translated it for us. Within

a few seconds, the song spread through the people nearby and back down the trail, mile after mile, the voices of our great, exhausted, but unbroken host lifting it to God. That was the first time I thought to myself that with our strength as a people, and Christ as our Savior, we might just survive and maybe even make something great in our new country. My wife had grown weaker in recent days, and she couldn’t sing very loud, but what she had she gave to God, and I reckon her voice resounded through the heavenly courts louder than legions of them cherubim and angels the Scriptures speak of. I’d be glad to see them soon.

Pastor Jesse told us Chief Ross’s sweet wife, Quatie, died on their boat trip into Little Rock, so we prayed for our leader. Then we hit a cypress swamp that there was no way around. That cold, filthy water come up to my 60-year-old wife’s waist. It had sharp stumps and jagged outcroppings you couldn’t see under the water, and they hit and cut and gashed us as we went. That swamp stretched on for



Struggle and strife: John Ross was the principal chief (similar to president) of the Cherokee for nearly four decades. He labored for years in a vain effort to save the tribe’s ancestral homeland in the Southeast.

30 straight miles. Took us three full days to get through it.

I carried my wife on my back the last few miles. I didn’t know which of us was gonna die first, but I reckoned if I had anything to do with it, it wouldn’t be her. I don’t even remember when we got out of that swamp, but I’ll never forget the night after we did — it was the only time she cried on the whole trail. She told me that she had just about decided Jesus couldn’t be real, nor the Bible either, after all the sorrow she had seen the past months and years, but when she saw what I did to get her through that swamp she finally knew for sure what Jesus looked like and what kind of heart he had, and she was never going to doubt Him again.

I didn’t either, though I lost a leg to infection after we got out of that swamp. If that’s all it took for my wife to truly believe, it was a small price, plus it got us a wagon ride the rest of the way to Tahlequah, site of our new tribal capital. It was a week into March 1839, and you could feel the first

glimmers of spring awakening in our beautiful new country, which no one described better than John Ridge, whom I didn’t hate anymore:

It is the finest region I ever beheld in any part of the United States. The streams of all sizes, from the rivers to the brooks, run swiftly over clean stones and pebbles, and water is clear as crystal, in which excellent fish abound. The soil ranges from the best prairie lands to the best bottom lands, in vast tracts. Never did I see a better location for settlements with better springs. God has thrown His favors here with a broad cast.

Indian Territory

I would like to say all went well from that point, but so much hatred resided in the hearts of our people, new trouble was certain. Disputes abounded over tribal authority between various factions, including the majority Ross

Party, the old settlers who had lived in Arkansas and Indian Territory for years and fought off the fierce Osage, and the Treaty Party. I will forever regret that members of the Ross Party murdered Elias and the Ridges for selling our land. They intended the same for Stand, but he caught wind of it and escaped on Sam Worcester’s horse. We suffered a tragic sort of Cherokee civil war for the next seven years. Stand, a shy but rugged man, rode a trail of vengeance and killed at least one Ross Party leader in a face-to-face gunfight.

Finally in 1846, he and Chief Ross made amends, and that is when something close to a “Golden Age” descended on our people — till the white man’s war with himself ensnared us in 1861. Meanwhile, though, we built ourselves a new life and began to raise up a great new territory from a virgin land. Cherokee sons and daughters helped lead it. We remembered those who had walked the earth with us, and we labored to build a better country for those who walked after. ■