

John Burnett's Story of the Trail of Tears

Web Version: <http://www.cherokee.org/Culture/HistoryPage.asp?=128>

John Burnett, an interpreter in the U.S. Army, recounted the horror of the Trail of Tears from the stockade experience to the end of the painful journey.

The removal of Cherokee Indians from their life long homes in the year of 1838 found me a young man in the prime of life and a Private soldier in the American Army. Being acquainted with many of the Indians and able to fluently speak their language, I was sent as interpreter into the Smoky Mountain Country in May, 1838, and witnessed the execution of the most brutal order in the History of American Warfare. I saw the helpless Cherokees arrested and dragged from their homes, and driven at the bayonet point into the stockades. And in the chill of a drizzling rain on an October morning I saw them loaded like cattle or sheep into six hundred and forty-five wagons and started toward the west.

One can never forget the sadness and solemnity of that morning. Chief John Ross led in prayer and when the bugle sounded and the wagons started rolling many of the children rose to their feet and waved their little hands good-by to their mountain homes, knowing they were leaving them forever. Many of these helpless people did not have blankets and many of them had been driven from home barefooted.

On the morning of November the 17th we encountered a terrific sleet and snow storm with freezing temperatures and from that day until we reached the end of the fateful journey on March the 26th, 1839, the sufferings of the Cherokees were awful. The trail of the exiles was a trail of death. They had to sleep in the wagons and on the ground without fire. And I have known as many as twenty-two of them to die in one night of pneumonia due to ill treatment, cold, and exposure. Among this number was the beautiful Christian wife of Chief John Ross. This noble hearted woman died a martyr to childhood, giving her only blanket for the protection of a sick child. She rode thinly clad through a blinding sleet and snow storm, developed pneumonia and died in the still hours of a bleak winter night, with her head resting on Lieutenant Greggs saddle blanket...

The long painful journey to the west ended March 26th, 1839, with four-thousand silent graves reaching from the foothills of the Smoky Mountains to what is known as Indian territory in the West. And covetousness on the part of the white race was the cause of all that the Cherokees had to suffer...

Chief John Ross sent Junaluska as an envoy to plead with President Jackson for protection for his people, but Jackson's manner was cold and indifferent toward the rugged son of the forest who had saved his life. He met Junaluska, heard his plea but curtly said, "Sir, your audience is ended. There is nothing I can do for you." The doom of the Cherokee was sealed. Washington, D.C., had decreed that they must be driven West and their lands given to the white man, and in May 1838, an army of 4000 regulars, and 3000 volunteer soldiers under command of General Winfield Scott, marched into the Indian country and wrote the blackest chapter on the pages of American history.

Men working in the fields were arrested and driven to the stockades. Women were dragged from their homes by soldiers whose language they could not understand. Children were often separated from their parents and driven into the stockades with the sky for a blanket and the earth for a pillow. And often the old and infirm were prodded with bayonets to hasten them to the stockades...

Murder is murder, and somebody must answer. Somebody must explain the streams of blood that flowed in the Indian country in the summer of 1838. Somebody must explain the 4000 silent graves that mark the trail of the Cherokees to their exile. I wish I could forget it all, but the picture of 645 wagons lumbering over the frozen ground with their cargo of suffering humanity still lingers in my memory.

Two Accounts of the "Trail of Tears"

Web Version: <http://marchand.ucdavis.edu/lessons/HS/CherokeeHS.htm>

The following two excerpts provide a window into a calamitous tragedy of the Trail of Tears. Many Native Americans were driven from their homes, marched across the freezing terrain without adequate clothing, given poor food provisions. As one might expect the death toll mounted along the way, especially among the elderly and ill individuals.

DOCUMENT #17

Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokee".

"Under Scott's orders...[Cherokee] men were seized in their fields or along the road, women were taken from their [spinning] wheels and children from their play. In many cases, on turning for one last look as they crossed the ridge, they saw their homes in flames, fired by the lawless rabble that followed on the heels of the soldiers to loot and pillage...

"...In Oct. 1838 the long procession of exiles was set in motion...the sick, the old people, and the smaller children, with the blankets, cooking pots and other belongings in wagons, the rest on foot or on horses. The number of wagons was 645.

"...In the middle of winter, with the [Mississippi] river running full of ice...several [groups] were obliged to wait some time on the eastern bank...In talking with old men and women [60 years later]...the author found that the lapse of over half a century had not sufficed to wipe out the memory of the miseries of that halt beside the frozen river, with hundreds of sick and dying penned up in wagons or stretched upon the ground...

At last their destination was reached...It was now March, 1839, the journey having occupied...six months of the hardest part of the year."

DOCUMENT #19

Account of a traveler who signed himself "A Native of Maine", The New York Observer, Jan. 1839.

"...On Tuesday evening we fell in with a detachment of the poor Cherokee Indians...about eleven hundred...We found them in the forest camped for the night...under a severe fall of rain...many of the aged Indians were suffering extremely from the fatigue of the journey, and ill health...

"We found the road literally filled with the procession for about three miles in length. The sick and feeble were carried in wagons...multitudes go on foot -- even aged females, apparently

nearly ready to drop into the grave, were traveling with heavy burdens...on the sometimes frozen ground...with no covering for the feet....They buried fourteen or fifteen at every stopping place...Some carry a downcast dejected look...of despair; others a wild frantic appearance as if about to...pounce like a tiger upon their enemies...

"When I read in the President's Message that he was happy to inform the Senate that the Cherokees were peaceably and without reluctance removed -- and remember that it was on the third day of December when not one of the detachments had reached their destinations...I wished the President could have been there that very day..."