

SOUTHEASTERN U.S. 1830S

Blankets for the Dead

The Native American tribes uprooted by white settlement and expansion are too numerous to name. For many years, Native Americans were simply driven back by armed violence or the threat of violence. Then, in 1830, the government began systematically removing all Native Americans from the Eastern U.S. The removal of the Cherokees from Georgia in 1838 has become known as the Trail of Tears. But there were, in fact, many such trails, as the Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles and other tribes were forced to abandon their homelands.

For more than a century, the Cherokees had watched first the colonies and then the United States chip away at their tribal territory. In treaty after treaty, they exchanged one more piece of land for one more promise of respect and coexistence.

The Cherokees, like most Eastern tribes, sided with the British during the Revolutionary War because they feared that an independent American republic would take over their land. Shortly after the war, their fears deepened as the new government claimed all of the remaining Cherokee portions of North and South Carolina and part of those in Tennessee. Shrunken, subjected to constant harassment, the Cherokee Nation adopted a new strategy for survival in the early 1800s.

The tribe already counted among its number many British traders and soldiers who over the years had married Cherokee women. Now the Native Americans began to adopt the ways of white outsiders. Many took up Christianity. They began to replace their small stick-and-wattle houses with large structures made of logs, lumber or bricks. Textile makers wove cotton and wool cloth to use at home or sell in general stores.

Schoolchildren practiced their arithmetic and learned to read in both English and Cherokee. (The invention of an alphabet by a half-Cherokee, half-white man named Sequoyah brought the Cherokee language into written form.) Cherokee farmers tilled the rich earth of the valleys using foreign methods and equipment, just as Whites planted Native American crops. Some wealthy Cherokee landowners even purchased black slaves.

In 1827 the Cherokee Nation adopted a constitution based on that of the United States. The following year, a bilingual newspaper called *The Cherokee Phoenix* became the first Native American voice in U.S. journalism.

The Cherokees' efforts to coexist didn't prevent some frontier Whites from trying to steal their property. Ironically, most of those who harassed the Indians couldn't read the English section of the Cherokee newspaper.

A Congressman from Georgia perpetuated the image of the Cherokee "savage" by publicly declaring that the Native Americans of his state lived on a crude diet of roots and reptiles. During a Washington dinner party, a visiting Cherokee leader made a point of asking the legislator to pass "those roots"—by which he meant the potatoes. In this case, it could be said that "savagery" was in the eye of the beholder.

The Cherokees had transformed their culture in a single generation, in hopes of proving their humanity to their

white neighbors and gaining the right to live undisturbed. Still, when it came to changing the government's attitude toward Native Americans, cultural transformation wasn't enough. Despite the outward signs of equality, the majority of Whites still regarded Cherokees as ignorant and inferior. This prejudice was heightened by greed: Whites craved Native American land for themselves. And, in Georgia in 1828, the discovery of gold made that land even more desirable.

Andrew Jackson, who had risen to fame by waging wars against the Creeks in Alabama and the Seminoles in Florida, won the presidency in 1828 on a campaign promise of free land for white settlers. Jackson promoted the idea (first proposed by Thomas Jefferson) of moving Native Americans into unsettled prairie west of the Mississippi to make room for Whites. In mid-May 1830, Congress gave Jackson his wish by passing the Indian Removal Act. The law set a new course for Native American/white relations. No longer did the government pretend to desire peaceful coexistence within its borders.

The Choctaws of Mississippi were the first Southeastern tribe to be removed to the West. The Creeks of Alabama and the Chickasaws of Mississippi and Tennessee were relocated next. Beginning in 1835, the Seminoles in Florida fought off the U.S. Army for seven years before finally giving up their homeland.

The Cherokees knew their turn was coming. They knew about the sufferings of the other tribes. But the Cherokees had kept their faith in "civilization." In 1832, they had appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court and won the right to remain independent and self-governing.

This right existed only on paper. The State of Georgia ignored it, as did President Jackson. Federal agents, armed with ready cash, found a small group of Cherokees willing to sign a removal treaty. In December 1835, the Treaty of New Echota turned over to the U.S. government all that was left of the Cherokee lands (about 35,000 square miles in the region where Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina meet) in exchange for \$5 million and a parcel of western prairie.

The vast majority of Cherokees rejected the arrangement and stayed put while its supporters joined a small fragment of the tribe already living in the West. The Cherokees had played by all the rules, but the government kept changing them.

Among the influential Whites who spoke out against Native American removal were Davy Crockett and Daniel Webster. But their influence couldn't turn the tide. White squatters interpreted the treaty as permission to seize Native American land. To complete the process, Jackson's handpicked presidential successor, Martin Van Buren, mobilized an army to evict the Native Americans.

On a warm week in May 1838, into the peaceful north Georgia towns and farms of the Cherokees marched 7,000 U.S. soldiers. Their orders came directly from the president: Herd every Cherokee man, woman and child off the land.

The commander of this army, Gen. Winfield Scott, asked the Cherokees to cooperate so that his soldiers would not have to resort to physical force or violence. He asked them to help him make the best of a terrible situation. But Scott's vision of an orderly evacuation could not hold. Across Cherokee country, men were ordered at gunpoint

from their plows, women from their looms. Jubilant Whites looted or burned or occupied the homes left behind.

The experience had been similar for other tribes. One Choctaw elder never forgot the day he and his family were driven from their comfortable Mississippi homeplace: A 5-year-old, he was playing in the front yard when men came with a wagon and ordered everyone to get in. The strangers made him leave his toys in the dirt, and by the time the wagon pulled out, a white boy—the son of the new household—was already playing with them.

There was little resistance to the Cherokee roundup after all. Although several hundred tribe members escaped into the remote mountains of North Carolina (where their descendants still live today), 15,000 others were held in 13 makeshift concentration camps in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama until the massive removal to the West could be organized.

For a few of the Cherokees, the difficult 800-mile journey by river and over land began immediately after they were taken captive. The government hired local businessmen along the way to provide the exiles with food, clothing and transportation. These contractors were often willing to endanger Native American lives for the sake of extra profit. Spoiled meat and flour caused widespread sickness. Poor maintenance of riverboats made drownings commonplace. Many Indians preferred to walk rather than board the “death ships.”

A summer drought halted river travel and forced most of the Cherokees to wait in the camps, which amounted to wilderness prisons. Cholera, dysentery and other diseases spread quickly because of the oppressive heat and overcrowding. Many Cherokees died before the journey had really begun.

In October, the remaining 13,000 Cherokee men, women and children in the camps were ordered to gather what belongings they could carry and begin moving West, under the guard of U.S. Army soldiers. Autumn rains had made the rivers navigable again but reduced the roads to quagmires. Cold weather brought new epidemics of whooping cough and measles. The travelers marked every stopping place with new graves. In places where the ground was frozen or there wasn't enough time for burial, they covered the bodies of the dead with blankets.

Other tribes faced the same difficulties. The Seminoles still commemorate a similar experience. To this day, at Seminole funerals, a new blanket is spread over the coffin to symbolize the hardships the ancestors endured during the Removal.

A government agent described the Choctaws' ordeal, as well as his own moral conflict: “They are a wretched set of beings, nearly naked, and have marched the last twenty-four hours through sleet and snow, barefooted. If I could have done it with propriety, I would have given them shoes.”

Soldiers who took pity on the Native Americans and tried to help them could be punished for their actions. In the winter of 1832, a boat loaded with Choctaws got stuck in ice on the Arkansas River near Fort Smith. The lieutenant escorting the party requested extra blankets from the boat's supply. Without them, the stranded Choctaws faced death from exposure. When a superior officer denied the request, the lieutenant physically attacked him in order to get the blankets released. For this attempt to aid the Native Americans, the lieutenant was dishonorably discharged from the Army.

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UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

All told, nearly 100,000 Native Americans from the five Southeastern tribes walked into exile during the 1830s. More than 4,000 Cherokees—one-quarter of the tribe—perished on the journey. The Creeks and Seminoles suffered even heavier losses. The Seminoles mounted the strongest resistance to removal, but by 1858, after repeated battles with U.S. forces, barely a hundred of them remained in Florida.

For the survivors of the Trails of Tears, the opportunity to “prosper and be happy,” which the treaties had promised, proved an elusive dream. But the sense of tribal identity remained strong. Today, a sacred fire made from coals carried by Cherokee women from their homeland in 1838 still burns near Gore, Okla.

The great Native American removals didn’t solve the “Indian problem.” They only postponed it. Over the next several decades, as white settlement continued to push westward, Native American removal and containment would resume. The concept of the “reservation” would come to dominate federal policy. And the old tribal worlds would shrink to scattered islands on a map drawn by strangers.

Excerpt from Teaching Tolerance’s out-of-print book, *Us and Them*, written by Jim Carnes.