
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 four-thousand silent graves that mark the trail of the Cherokees to their exile. I wish I could forget it all, but the picture of six-hundred and forty-five wagons lumbering over the frozen ground with their Cargo of suffering humanity still lingers in my memory.

Let the Historian of a future day tell the sad story with its sighs, its tears and dying groans. Let the great Judge of all the earth weigh our actions and reward us according to our work.

—JOHN G. BURNETT
United States Army
and interpreter on the
Trail of Tears, ca. 1890

warriors, was as much a slave war as an Indian war. And to complicate it further, some Creeks joined the Seminoles while others fought with the Americans against them. The war dragged on from 1835 until 1842. In 1837 the Americans captured Osceola, the greatest of the Seminole war leaders, who had come in to parley under a flag of truce. He died the next year in prison. Gradually, through such treachery, surrender, and capture, more than four thousand Seminoles were forced to move west. Having spent twenty million dollars and having lost fifteen hundred soldiers, the United States gave up further attempts to seize the relative handful of Seminoles who still remained in the fastness of the Everglades.

Some Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws, like the Seminoles, would survive in their old homelands, but for most the treaties meant a long trek west to Indian Territory. Some went voluntarily; others went under armed escort. Virtually all went with a deep sadness. And virtually all suffered, for the journeys were grim. In 1831–32 the Choctaws, without blankets, shoes, or winter clothes, traveled through one of the worst winters the south had ever seen. American incompetence, more than malice, left them sick, hungry, and exhausted. In 1836–37 the *hillis hayas*, or medicine men, of the Creeks extinguished the sacred fires in the town squares. They preserved the ashes and flints used by the fire makers, wrapping these and other sacred objects in deerskin bundles that they strapped to their backs, and without a word began the procession westward. American troops conducted about twenty thousand Creeks west, and white settlers gathered en route to watch this exodus of a forlorn nation that they had reduced to misery.

The Cherokees endured the most deadly migration. Like the Creeks, the Cherokees departed late, and like the Creeks, they had offered resistance, albeit in the courtroom; now they suffered and died in even greater numbers. How many died remains unclear even now. The most careful estimates guess that of the sixteen thousand who set out, two thousand died during the 1838 journey itself. But losses continued to mount during the following years as epidemics ravaged the weakened survivors. By the highest estimates, a quarter or even more of the Cherokees died in the wake of removal.

The Cherokee and Creek removals were perhaps the most dramatic, but during the 1820s and 1830s, the majority of Indian peoples east of the Mississippi found they had to move west. Given a poor choice, some disagreed among themselves, some moved voluntarily, some went under duress. It was a time of tremendous upheaval, of profound dislocation. And entering, as they were, onto lands already occupied by people farther west, their removal sparked a new wave of intertribal conflict on the prairies and Great Plains. The removals affected many more Indians than those physically deprived of their homelands.

Across the Ohio, the northern tribes, too, found themselves forced to choose between exodus and life on individual allotments surrounded by whites. Some chose to stay, and small Miami, Wyandot, Potawatomi, and Ottawa communities survived in a sea of whites. More departed across the Mississippi. Along the northern border from upstate New York, through upper Michigan and across northern Wisconsin, the Iroquois, the Menominees, and the Ojibwas fought against the tide of removal. Eventually, they managed to retain some remnants of their old territories as reservations.

The attachment of some people to land and home persevered through