

## The Trail Where They Wept

*The whole scene since I have been in this country has been nothing but a heartrending one, and such a one as I would be glad to get rid of as soon as the circumstances will permit.*

General John Wool, Commanding Officer,  
US Army Forces in Charge of Cherokee Removal,  
To the Honorable Lewis Cass, Secretary of War  
September 10, 1836

Robbie was so appalled by the events of the previous night's visit that he decided to research the Trail of Tears in earnest. He began with his history teacher that morning.

"Good morning, Robbie," welcomed Ms. Hastings, a warm, engaging 27-year-old fifth-year teacher.

"Good morning," Robbie replied somewhat drearly.

Ms. Hastings immediately picked up on Robbie's unusual demeanor.

"Is everything O.K., Robbie?"

"Yes. Well, maybe. Do you know anything about the Trail of Tears—the Cherokee removal?"

A surprised Ms. Hastings replied, "I've read a fair amount about that event, Robbie. Why do you ask?"

“Well, I found out about some of it recently and I really hadn’t known anything about it, that’s all. I’m just curious.”

“We don’t really cover it in this course, but I’d be glad to share what I can with you.”

Just before the bell Robbie’s classmates filed in. As the bell sounded to begin class, Ms. Hastings asked Robbie, “Why don’t you come by on your free period and we’ll talk about it?”

“O.K., but I don’t want to bother you with it.”

“No problem—just come by and let’s see what we can cover.”

In preparation for Robbie’s questions, Ms. Hastings pulled a couple of her references. She had studied the Trail of Tears during her undergraduate work, and she located the topic in her well-organized and labeled notebooks. She scanned them quickly. Her bookshelf was full of dozens and dozens of history books. When Robbie arrived, Ms. Hastings could still see the boy’s anguish.

“Would you like to share with me why this topic has suddenly become so important, Robbie?”

"I'd rather not, but I would like to hear what you think about it."

"How much do you know?"

"Not much. I know that it was the forced removal of the Cherokee Nation to the west. And it happened around 1838 and 1839. That's really it."

Ms. Hastings was concerned about Robbie's sudden interest, but began, "O.K., well, the Trail of Tears, as it has come to be known by most historians, or more correctly, 'The Trail Where They Wept,' was a rather dark chapter in the history of the United States. While there have certainly been a number of others, many people feel this is among the very worst.

"This is a pretty long and complicated story, Robbie. But the key items, I think, are relatively simple to understand. The core issue was that the American settlers wanted the Cherokee land. Our history is obviously full of such encroachments, beginning with Columbus, and then the Plymouth Colony, through the Cherokee, the wars on the Great Plains, and culminating, for all practical purposes, with the Battle at Wounded Knee. These tensions have always been a part of

humankind, and they have certainly been prevalent in the history of the Americas.

“Remember that the Louisiana Purchase was executed in 1803 and the Corps of Discovery—the Lewis and Clark Expedition—mapped out what the country had actually bought, returning in 1806. There was enormous interest in the West. And so, over a period of time, the westward push of the white settlers was bound to create more and more problems. In order to ease both existing and future frictions, the United States government began to arrange a series of treaties with the Cherokee which, on the surface, were to benefit both sides. In exchange for land cessions, the government paid the natives certain monetary amounts. Of course, we have seen that these transactions were manipulative and over the long term sure to go in the favor of the government. The lands of the Cherokee—and the Creeks, Choctaws, and others—kept shrinking and shrinking.

“As you can imagine, these land cessions caused strife among the leaders of the tribes. Some of the old guard were insistent that they not surrender any lands under any circumstances. The more pragmatic leaders realized that the white settlers were going to

come anyway, so they attempted to get some concessions in return. They also hoped that a more clearly defined territory in which the whites could migrate would benefit both sides. But as quickly as they were drawn the new territorial lines were violated by the whites. And so factions began to splinter off among the groups of native leaders, each claiming to represent the interests of the entire nation. Then, of course, the U.S. government would negotiate with the group that offered the least resistance. It's not really hard to understand. I guess it's just human nature. How are you doing so far, Robbie?"

Despite his outward disposition, Robbie replied softly, "Fine."

"Most conventional history books don't treat the Indian Wars with the rigor and objectivity the subject merits—at least in my opinion. In addition to the actual conflicts, skirmishes, battles, and wars with the Indians, the presence of the whites caused them to suffer in many other ways. I've already mentioned the bogus treaties. But most people don't realize how badly the diseases brought by the Europeans ravaged the natives. Hundreds of thousands of natives died from smallpox alone.

“I think the other aspect so difficult to follow and understand was the nature of the alliances formed among the settlers, different countries, the United States government, and various tribes. These alliances frequently shifted or changed altogether, often pitting former allies against each other.

“One particular example is relevant to this painful story. You see, before Andrew Jackson became president he was a famous army general who made his name by—you guessed it—fighting Indians. One battle in particular was at Horseshoe Bend, on the Tallapoosa River in Alabama, on March 27, 1814. Jackson’s mission was to defeat the Creeks there. Well, in order to gain as much advantage on the Creeks as possible, Jackson enlisted the services of about 500 Cherokee—about one-quarter of his total force.”

Robbie was amazed to hear this fact.

“And so they defeated the Creek—actually they massacred them—and Jackson became a hero. There are several accounts of the battle that suggest Jackson was saved at least once by a Cherokee warrior and that due to their battle assignments the Cherokee losses

were in disproportion to those of the white soldiers.

“One of the reasons this removal is so tragic is that many of the Cherokee who assisted Jackson felt that he would not betray the loyalty they had rendered to him. The warriors who fought for Jackson as young men were now tribal elders and leaders. They were convinced that Jackson would not have won that battle—or perhaps even survived—without their participation and so, as president, he would return the favor by not signing their eviction order. There was no way he could turn his back on them—but they were wrong.

“Over many years negotiations took place between the government and various delegations of Cherokee. Finally, a faction calling themselves the New Echota group signed away all of the Cherokee lands to the United States and agreed to be resettled in Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River in what is now Arkansas and Oklahoma.

“That decision did not go over well back in Cherokee Territory. Another group was immediately dispatched to Washington to lobby against the validity of the treaty, arguing

that the group that signed the agreement did not represent the true will of the people and were acting for themselves. All efforts failed however, and a short time later the army began rounding up Indians for removal. Up to the last minute, the Cherokee were sure that they would not—and *could* not—be forced to leave.

“Finally, soldiers began appearing at farms to round up natives to be sent to temporary holding pens for further disposition to the West. Some escaped to the hills and later re-formed into what is now called the ‘Eastern Band’ of the Cherokee. The group that eventually went west became known as the ‘Western Band.’ When the groups all finally arrived in Indian Territory, there were tremendous difficulties and a few assassinations of the leaders who had sold the lands. It’s a very tragic story, Robbie.

“Many historians believe that about 4,000 of the original population of about 16,000 died during the removal, most due to sickness along the Trail or in the holding pens.

“Sickness?” Robbie interrupted.

“Sickness. Whooping cough, cholera, exposure. The holding pens bred virulent diseases, particularly cholera. When the groups



finally moved out, the soldiers prodded the natives along like cattle and just kept marching them west. It didn't matter if they were sick. Besides, most of the groups of a thousand-or-so had only one doctor assigned. They had very little clothing, blankets, food, or water. Many times dead bodies were simply left along the roadside. The commanding officer, General Winfield Scott, ordered his soldiers to treat the natives with as much dignity and respect as possible, but I think history has shown that the vast majority of the natives were poorly treated and, in many cases, taken advantage of.

"I have a few books here if you would like to read more about this. The first one is called *Take the Cannoli*, written by Sarah Vowell, a social commentator on National Public Radio. The book contains a collection of essays. The one you want is entitled 'What I See When I Look at the Face on the \$20 Bill.' I've tagged it for you. That one is good for an overview. The other book is called *Trail of Tears* by John Ehle. This one is much more historical. You can get all of the names, dates, places, historical documentation, and details of the whole story. It's also very good.

"Let me just point out two passages that I marked when I read this book. Perhaps these

observations will provide you with some sense of what was actually happening at the time. The first is a letter from the famous poet Ralph Waldo Emerson to then-President Martin Van Buren expressing his dismay over the entire affair:

A crime is projected that confounds our understandings by its magnitude. A crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokee of a country. For how could we call the conspiracy that should crush these poor Indians our government, or the land that was cursed by their parting and dying imprecations our country any more? You, sir, will bring down the renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy. And the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world.

Robbie sat quietly as he absorbed Emerson's comments.

"The other is the actual proclamation from General Scott, announcing the removal and advising the Cherokee to cooperate. When

you get a chance take a look at the language used in this, Robbie." The boy scanned the document.

"I think that covers the frame, Robbie, but there's certainly much more to this story. Has that been enough for now?"

"Yes. More than enough. Thanks very much, Ms. Hastings."

"Are you sure you don't want to tell me why this is so important to you?"

"I'm fine. It's just a personal thing."

"O.K. Well, just let me know if you need some help. You don't seem quite yourself today."

"It's O.K., Ms. Hastings. Don't worry about me. Thanks for the information and the books. I'll take a look at them."

Upon his return from school, Robbie stared at the stick for quite a while and then sat down to study Ms. Hastings' books.