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Reading 3: "Every Cherokee man, woman or child must be in motion..."

For two years after the Treaty of New Echota, John Ross and the Cherokees continued to seek concessions from the federal government, which remained disorganized in its plans for removal. Only the eager settlers with their eyes on the Cherokee lands moved with determination. At the end of December 1837, the government warned Cherokee that the clause in the Treaty of New Echota requiring that they should "remove to their new homes within two years from the ratification of the treaty" would be enforced.[1] In May, President Van Buren sent Gen. Winfield Scott to get the job done. On May 10, 1838, General Scott issued the following proclamation:

> *Cherokees!* The President of the United States has sent me, with a powerful army, to cause you, in obedience to the Treaty of 1835, to join that part of your people who are already established in prosperity, on the other side of the Mississippi. . . . The full moon of May is already on the wane, and before another shall have passed away, every Cherokee man, woman and child . . . must be in motion to join their brethren in the far West.[2]

Federal troops and state militias began to move the Cherokees into stockades. In spite of warnings to troops to treat them kindly, the roundup proved harrowing. A missionary described what he found at one of the collection camps in June:

> The Cherokees are nearly all prisoners. They have been dragged from their houses, and encamped at the forts and military posts, all over the nation. In Georgia, especially, multitudes were allowed no time to take any thing with them except the clothes they had on. Well-furnished houses were left prey to plunderers, who, like hungry wolves, follow in the trail of the captors. These wretches rifle the houses and strip the helpless, unoffending owners of all they have on earth.[3]

Three groups left in the summer, traveling from present-day Chattanooga by rail, boat, and wagon, primarily on the water route, but as many as 15,000 people still awaited removal. Sanitation was deplorable. Food, medicine, clothing, even coffins for the dead, were in short supply. Water was scarce and often contaminated. Diseases raged through the camps. Many died.

Those travelling over land were prevented from leaving in August due to a summer drought. The first detachments set forth only to find no water in the springs and they returned back to their camps. The remaining Cherokees asked to postpone removal until the fall. The delay was granted, provided they remain in the camps until travel resumed. The Army also granted John Ross's request that the Cherokees manage their own removal. The government provided wagons, horses, and oxen; Ross made arrangements for food and other necessities. In October and November, 12 detachments of 1,000 men, women, children, including more than 100 slaves, set off on an 800 mile-journey overland to the west. Five thousand horses, and 654 wagons, each drawn by 6 horses or mules, went along. Each group was led by a respected Cherokee leader and accompanied by a doctor, and sometimes a missionary. Those riding in the wagons were usually only the sick, the aged, children, and nursing mothers with infants.

The northern route, chosen because of dependable ferries over the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and a well-travelled road between the two rivers, turned out to be the more difficult. Heavy autumn rains and hundreds of wagons on the muddy route made roads nearly impassable; little grazing and game could be found to supplement meager rations. Two-thirds of the Cherokees were trapped between the ice-bound Ohio and Mississippi rivers during January. A traveler from Maine happened upon one of the caravans in Kentucky:

> We found the road literally filled with the procession for about three miles in length. The sick and feeble were carried in waggons . . . a great many ride horseback and multitudes go on foot—even aged females, apparently nearly ready to drop into the grave, were traveling with heavy burdens attached to the back—on the sometimes frozen ground, and sometimes muddy streets, with no covering for the feet except what nature had given them.[4]

A Cherokee survivor later recalled:

> Long time we travel on way to new land. People feel bad when they leave Old Nation. Women cry and made sad wails. Children cry and many men cry, and all look sad like when friends die, but they say nothing and just put heads down and keep on go towards West. Many days pass and people die very much.[5]

In 1972, Robert K. Thomas, a professor of anthropology from the University of Chicago and an elder in the Cherokee tribe, told the following story to a few friends:

> Let me tell you this. My grandmother was a little girl in Georgia when the soldiers came to her house to take her family away. . . . The soldiers were pushing her family away from their land as fast as they could. She ran back into the house before a soldier could catch her and grabbed her [pet] goose and hid it in her apron. Her parents knew she had the goose and let her keep it. When she had bread, she would dip a little in water and slip it to the goose in her apron.
>
> Well, they walked a long time, you know. A long time. Some of my relatives didn't make it. It was a bad winter and it got really cold in Illinois. But my grandmother kept her goose alive.
>
> One day they walked down a deep icy gulch and my grandmother could see down below her a long white road. No one wanted to go over the road, but the soldiers made them go, so they headed across. When my grandmother and her parents were in the middle of the road, a great black snake started hissing down the river, roaring toward the Cherokees. The road rose up in front of her in a thunder and came down again, and when it came down all of the people in front of her were gone, including her parents.
>
> My grandmother said she didn't remember getting to camp that night, but she was with her aunt and uncle. Out on the white road she had been so terrified, she squeezed her goose hard and suffocated it in her apron, but her aunt and uncle let her keep it until she fell asleep. During the night they took it out of her apron.[6]

On March 24, 1839, the last detachments arrived in the west. Some of them had left their homeland on September 20, 1838. No one knows exactly how many died during the journey. Missionary doctor Elizur Butler, who accompanied one of the detachments, estimated that nearly one fifth of the Cherokee population died. The trip was especially hard on infants, children, and the elderly. An unknown number of slaves also died on the Trail of Tears. The U.S. government never paid the $5 million promised to the Cherokees in the Treaty of New Echota.

Questions for Reading 3

1. What is the tone of General Scott's message to the Cherokees? Would you have tried to resist the removals after hearing Scott's

message?

2. What happened to the Cherokee between May and October of 1838? What was life like for the Cherokee during that period?

3. With little time to plan and prepare, 17,000 Cherokee with their possessions, horses, and wagons moved from their homelands to Oklahoma. This type of mass migration was unprecented in the early 19th century. What sort of arrangements would be needed to prepare for and carry out such a mass movement of people? If you were given a short amount of time to leave your home and move to an unknown place, how would you feel? What would you take with you?

4. What do you think would have been the worst part of the entire removal process?

5. Do you think Robert Thomas's story about his grandmother is based on a real event? What do the students think the white road represented? In oral traditions, the speaker often "telescopes" historical time, collapsing one or more generations. Do you think the woman in Thomas's account was really his grandmother? Is that important? Do you think the story was intended as factual history? If not, what was it intended to record?

Reading No. 3 was compiled from Benjamin Levy, "Rattlesnake Springs" (Bradley County, Tennessee) National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1973; the brochure for the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail (Department of the Interior, National Park Service, n.d.; and John Ehle, Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation, *(New York: Doubleday, 1988).*

[1] Journal of Cherokee Studies *3.3 (1978), 134-5; cited in Ehle,* Trail of Tears, *319.*
[2] Journal of Cherokee Studies *3.3 (1978), 145; cited in Ehle,* Trail of Tears, 324-5.
[3] Baptist Missionary Magazine *18 (Sept 1838); cited in Hoig,* The Cherokees and Their Chiefs, *167.*
[4] New York Observer *(January 26, 1839); cited in Ehle,* The Trail of Tears, *358.*
[5] Oklahoman *(April 7, 1929), cited in Ehle,* The Trail of Tears, *358.*
[6] *Recorded by Kathleen Hunter, 1972.*

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Comments or Questions

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