

From:
The Cherokee Historical Association
Sponsor of "Unto These Hills"
Cherokee, North Carolina

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CHEROKEE, N. C., --An official delegation of Cherokee Indians will set out May 9 to retrace "The Trail of Tears" that 17,000 of their countrymen plodded across the nation into exile more than a hundred years ago.

The journey will mark the 113th anniversary of the forced removal by American troops of all but a bravely defiant remnant of the once powerful Cherokee Nation to strange lands in the West.

The delegation will follow the same trail, which winds 1,200 miles through Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri and Arkansas, that the Cherokee took in 1838 in an exodus into exile that in its total sum of death and misery has no parallel in American history.

Representing the Eastern Band of Cherokee and the Cherokee Historical Association, the delegation will pause at various spots already charted through months of research to mark the burial grounds of the thousands of Cherokee who died along the bitter trail.

The mayors of forty cities and town along the route will be singled out by the delegation to accept a traditional white clay calumet as a symbol of gratitude for the sympathy and kindness their people showed the Cherokee as they plodded West.

And to their kinsmen in Oklahoma the delegation will carry an invitation to join the North Carolina Cherokee here this summer in observing the re-creation of their proud and tragic history through the medium of Kermit Hunter's drama, "Unto These Hills", which opens

a ten-weeks' run in Mountainside Theatre June 23.

Leading the delegation will be Vice Chief MacKinley Ross, a descendant of one of the tribe's greatest peace chiefs, John Ross, who was forced to make the march on which his wife died.

With Ross will be Joseph Washington, the 69-year-old great-great-grandson of Tsali, the Cherokee martyr who gave his life before a firing squad so that a remnant of his people might remain in the land of their birth here in the Great Smokies.

The Cherokee were forced to take the "Trail of Tears" into exile after years of trying to hold out against white encroachment upon their lands, years which were filled with deceit and greed and strewn with broken treaties.

Their downfall was inevitable with the coming of the first white man, Hernando DeSoto, in 1540, but it was not until 1815 with the discovery of gold on their land that their doom was sealed.

With that discovery their enemies moved quickly to rout them from the coveted land. A treaty was signed in 1817, approved by President Jefferson, providing for removal of the Cherokee to the West.

Rage swept the majority of Cherokee chieftains when they learned of the pact which would have paid each man the handsome sum of forty-two dollars.

"The agreement is not the voice of our people," they cried. "It is a fraudulent breach of trust."

They declared that the majority of the Cherokee desired to remain in the land of their birth.

But the die had been cast and was not to be broken.

Finally, after years of bickering and fighting, it was agreed the Cherokees should be paid \$5,000,000 for their lands. General Winfield Scott was named to force the removal.

The general, commanding 7,000 troops, moved into the Cherokee

country in May, 1838, and began disarming the Cherokee.

Stockades were built under Scott's orders at various points in the Cherokee country. They were built in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama. Into them were herded the Cherokee.

From the Stockade garrisons, squads of troops were sent to search out with rifle and bayonet every small cabin hidden away in the coves or by the sides of mountain streams. They had orders to seize and bring in as prisoners all occupants, however or wherever they might be found.

Cherokee men--the young and the old, the strong and the weak-- were seized in their fields, along the trails, on their doorsteps, beside their hearths. Indian women were jerked from their wheels, their looms, even from their beds. Children were seized at play. Families at dinner were startled by the sudden gleam of bayonets in the doorway and rose up to be driven with blows and goads along the weary miles of trail that led to the stockades.

a lawless rabble followed quick upon the heels of the soldiers. They came so quickly that in many cases the Indians were barely on the march before their homes were blazing under the torch. They drove off cattle, ransacked homes, burned and looted.

By the end of May nearly 17,000 Cherokee had been herded into stockades across the Cherokee Nation.

Meanwhile, some 4,000 of the imprisoned Cherokee began the long westward trek by boat and raft from Chattanooga down the Tennessee to the Ohio and thence to the Mississippi. Many lives were lost, and the Cherokee chieftains pleaded for permission to lead the remainder overland to the new home.

And so the great migration began, the tragic exodus of a once proud nation,

The route they took was later to be called "The Trail of Tears", a trail that swarmed with misery and heartache, sickness and death.

There were men and women so old and gnarled they seemed more like mummies. There were newborn babies and unborn babies who chose just this moment to come into the world. There were the blind and the dying consumptives who had to be carried on litters. And there were idiots.

As they picked up their few belongings they looked about, gazed toward the high peaks of the Great Smokies, toward the mountains that had sheltered them, then moved on.

They were organized into detachments of a thousand each. There were more than 600 wagons, 5,000 horses, and a hundred or so oxen.

The procession crossed to the north side of the Hiwassee at a ferry above Gunstocker Creek, then moved down along the river and Northwest across Tennessee, through Athens, Pikesville, McMinnville, Mufreesboro.

The sick, the old, and the smaller children, with blankets, cooking pots and other belongings, rode the wagons and carts. The others trailed along on foot or on horseback.

All the groups were routed through Nashville where contractors furnished them with supplies. They passed by the home of Andrew Jackson, the man who had betrayed them, but some of the Cherokee who had helped win the Battle of Horseshoe Bend for him stopped by to pay their respects to a soldier.

As the Cherokee plodded West the rains came and with them came cold weather. The roads, cut up by thousands of horse, cattle, and people, hundreds of wagons and carts, became an appalling morass through which travel was made with great difficulty and distress.

There was death every day, and new sickness almost every mile.

The venerable Chief White Path, who had been a great warrior, succumbed to sickness, infirmity, and hardships of the forced journey near Hopkinsville, Ky. He was buried near the Nashville road and a monument of wood painted to resemble marble was erected to his memory. A tall pole with a flag of white linen flying at the top was erected at his grave to note the spot for his countrymen who were following.

The Cherokee crossed the Ohio at a ferry near the mouth of the Cumberland. The folks of Tennessee and Kentucky and Illinois saw them plodding along, heads down, sickness in their hearts and souls.

A traveler from Maine encountered a party led by the Rev. Jesse Bushyhead. What he saw was reproduced several weeks later in New York Observer.

"On Tuesday evening," the Maine traveler reported, "we fell in with a detachment of the poor Cherokee Indians.....about eleven hundred of them--sixty wagons, six hundred horses, and perhaps forty pairs of oxen. We found them in the forest camped for the night by the side of the road.....under a severe fall of rain, accompanied by heavy wind. With their canvas for a shield from the inclemency of the weather, and the cold wet ground for a resting place, after the fatigue of the day, they spent the night....."

"We learned from the inhabitants on the road where the Indians passed that they buried fourteen or fifteen at every stopping place, and they made a journey of ten miles per day only on the average....."

"When I read in the President's Message that he was happy to inform the Senate that the Cherokee 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 destination; and that a large majority had not made even half their journey when he made the

declaration, I thought I wished the President could have been there that very day in Kentucky with myself, and have seen the comfort and willingness with which the Cherokee were making their journey."

The Cherokee moved through southern Illinois, past Golconda, Vienna, Anna and Ware, until they reached the Mississippi River opposite Cape Girardeau, Missouri,

It was hard, fast winter now. And their crossing was delayed by the passing ice which endangered the boats that were to ferry them. For days they were compelled to remain beside the frozen river. Hundreds were sick or dying, penned up in the wagons or stretched out upon the ground. They only had a blanket overhead to keep out the January blast.

The crossing at last was made in two divisions. One was effected at Cape Girardeau. The other was made at Green's Ferry, a short distance below.

Safely on the other side, the homeless trudged on. They crossed Missouri, past Farmington, Rolla, Lebanon, Springfield, Monett, through a corner of Arkansas and entered Indian Territory, a confused, disillusioned people who had only a great expanse of country upon which to lay their tired and weary bodies.

It was strange and unfamiliar country. The mountains of home were a thousand miles and forever away.

The Cherokee had come to the end of their trail into exile in March, 1839. The journey had taken six months and in the hardest part of the year. More than 4,000 had died along the trail, to be buried in unmarked graves in strange and alien soil.

This is the trail that will be retraced.

It is a part of the forgotten page of history that is being re-created here in the summer-long drama of the Cherokee, "Unto

These Hills", so that ^{this} and succeeding generations may know one of the great true stories of our Nation.

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