

WHERE THE TRAIL OF TEARS BEGAN

By Lucy Justus

Very Poor History

A marker in the front yard is the only indication that the house belongs to history.

It's a white frame house on the banks of the Oostanaula River at Rome, Ga., now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. J. S. Crump and their three children. Recently it was visited for the first time by Mrs. Helen Taylor of Tulsa, Okla., great-great-granddaughter of the Cherokee leader who built it.

The story begins in 1770 with the birth of an Indian baby in what is now Folk County, Tenn., who was christened Gah-na-tah-tle-gi, which means "walking the mountain tops."

The name was prophetic. When the child became a man, he walked, literally and figuratively, on mountain tops. He became a leader of his people--serving as Speaker of the Council of the Cherokee Nation--and such a distinguished soldier in the War of 1812 that Gen. Andrew Jackson appointed him to the rank of major.

Georgia Gov. Wilson Lumpkin considered him a man "whose civilization and influence justly entitled him to a place in the confidence and brotherhood of the first statesmen and philanthropists of the age."

While Gah-na-tah-tle-gi was still a child, his parents moved from Tennessee to north Georgia and the white translated his tongue-tangling name as Ridge. Taking the English interpretation as his surname and later retaining his military title, he was known through much of his life as Major Ridge.

In 1792 Ridge married Susanne Wicket, the Cherokee "Princess Se-hoy-a." Two years later he built the two-story house beside the Oostanaula. And in the 1830s he became one of the first of his people to travel the Trail of Tears from the South to the West.

It was, in fact, at the Ridge home in Rome that the final treaty for the Cherokee removal was negotiated.

Although John Ross was principal chief of the tribe from 1828 to 1836, Ridge, who was 20 years Ross' senior, had long been a counselor and had helped devise the foundation for the Cherokee governmental structure.

Leaders of the Cherokee Nation frequently gathered at the Ridge home to discuss civic and political affairs and to celebrate on festal days. According to historian George Cathey, "while the capital was

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nominally at New Echota, it was a large part of the time on the lawn of Ridge's home."

A great oak, possibly one of those under which the Indians conferred, still shades the lawn of the Ridge home, although it now shows the marks of time. And, in a different way, so does the house. The logs have been covered with white-painted clapboard and two wings added. Inside, the ceilings have been lowered, plastered and painted.

Mrs. Crump escorted her visitors through the rooms and down to the basement, the only place where the original hand-hewn logs are visible.

The house is now owned by the textile corporation for which Mr. Crump works, and his family moves from city to city according to the demands of his job.

"All of us are interested in history," Mrs. Crump said, "and the first thing we do when we move to a new town is find out all we can about its past. We were fascinated when we learned who built this house."

Mrs. Taylor had at least three other famous ancestors who lived in the same area: John Ridge, the major's son, and Eliaz Boudinot and Stand Watie, who were brothers, and Mrs. Taylor's great-great-uncles.

The treaty negotiated at the Ridge home--and signed at New Echota, Dec. 29, 1835--cost the major, John and Boudinot their lives. And it led to the beginning of a legend that no weapon had ever been made that could kill Stand Watie.

Negotiations for the Cherokee removal started around 1819 and the discovery of gold in north Georgia in 1828 struck the final blow to the Indian cause. There were millions in the Cherokee hills and the white man had no intention of dividing it.

In 1835, a delegation led by John Ross signed a treaty ceding the Cherokee lands to the federal government for a price to be fixed by the Senate. The sum turned out to be amazingly small and entirely unsatisfactory to the Cherokees.

Ross believed if the Indians protested enough the government would reconsider and pay a reasonable price for the land. Ridge and several others felt that further resistance would lead only to greater suffering and oppression.

The Cherokee Nation split. Ridge resigned as Speaker of the Council and Boudinot gave up his position as editor of the newspaper The Phoenix.

Because of the rift, the largest and most important council meeting in Cherokee history convened at the home of John Ridge. At this

conferences, a committee from each party was appointed to meet and work out an arrangement suitable to both sides.

Major Ridge was chairman of one committee and John Ross, the other. Meeting at the Major's house they reached an agreement settling the differences and scheduled the formal signing of this instrument for Dec. 29 at New Echota.

When the time came, Ross repudiated his agreement, failed to attend the signing ceremony and rejected the terms. Major Ridge, John, Stand Watie, Elias Boudinot and various others did sign.

And the Indian nation split for a second time.

After the trek west, the Ross party avenged what they considered the treasonous act of the other group by murdering Major and John Ridge and Elias Boudinot.

Watie was scheduled to die at the same time but was away from home the night the others were killed. However, the assassinations led to an incident which gained Watie the respect of both groups and acclaim for his courage.

Learning that Boudinot was dead, Watie rode unarmed into a crowd of enemies surrounding his brother's body. As he approached, something--perhaps his grim silence--prompted the crowd to draw back and let him pass. Removing the sheet which covered his brother's face, Watie looked down at Boudinot, then turned and faced the crowd. In a steady, carrying voice, he declared, "I will give \$10,000 to know the name of the man who struck that blow."

No one spoke. But when Watie started to leave, neither did anyone move, although fully 100 men in the crowd had sworn to take his life only the night before.

The Ridge and Ross factions eventually settled their differences but the peace was not permanent. The Indians, like the rest of the country, were living in the shadow of approaching war.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Ross, Watie and others signed the Treaty of Alliance with the Confederate States. Ross repudiated his part in that as he did with the Treaty of Removal, aligning himself with the Federal forces, thus dividing the Nation a third time.

Some of the Cherokees joined the Union Army; others followed Watie, who kept his word to the Confederates.

In the spring of 1861, Watie organized an independent auxiliary force of Cherokees and white to protect the northern boundaries of the Cherokee Nation from raids by the Union troops. In July of that year he formed the first Cherokee Regiment, later known as the Cherokee Mounted Rifles. This regiment participated in some of the major conflicts of the war, including the bloody battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas, the Battle of Wilson Creek in Missouri and Bird Creek in

Oklahoma.

Watie had had no previous military experience, but like most Indian men, he was a trained and well-coordinated athlete and he was blessed with a talent for leadership. The men he commanded say that his influence made weak men brave and brave men braver. Fear, they say, never touched his soul and the word "retreat" was not in his vocabulary. When it was impossible to advance or hold a position, he commanded, "Charge back, boys! Charge back!" And it is said that he never ordered a charge--forward or backward--that he did not lead.

On May 10, 1864, Watie received from President Davis the appointment of brigadier general in the Confederate Army and was later brevetted. He is said to have been the only North American Indian ever to attain this rank.

He also holds the distinction of having been the last Confederate general to surrender his sword, handing over his troops to Lt. Col. A. C. Mathews on June 23, 1865, nearly three months after Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

Watie, who died Sept. 9, 1871, is buried in the old Ridge Cemetery in Delaward County, Okla. The monument over his grave and the one in his honor at Talequah are made of Georgia marble.

In order to raise funds for the monument at Talequah, Mrs. Taylor's mother wrote a book, "The Life of Stand Watie," which became recommended reading for Oklahoma school children and is now a collector's item, which sells for \$15.00 a copy when it is possible to find one. Mrs. Taylor went with her mother to interview many Confederate veterans for the book.

Mrs. Taylor's hostess in Atlanta was Mrs. Harold Lange, who grew up next door to Mrs. Taylor in Tulsa. The trip to Rome was arranged by Mrs. Sidney Ruskin, who is official ambassador of the Cherokee Nation.

"Visiting the Ridge house has been a thrilling experience," Mrs. Taylor said. "And Georgia is a beautiful state. I hope I will be able to come back again."

Standing outside the Ridge house and visualizing what it must have been like in the Major's day, one of the women commented, "I hope he's looking down on us." And a reporter, who felt that he did not look with favor on one whose ancestors probably helped deprive him of his home, hoped he was not.