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# Trail of Tears

## Workshops want it as a national trail

By Dave DeWitte  
Of The Southern Illinoisian

The suffering of Cherokee Indians on the 1,000-mile Trail of Tears from their eastern homelands to reservations in Oklahoma may be commemorated by a National Historic Trail, depending on the outcome of workshops in Carbondale and 12 other U.S. cities.

The National Park Service is asking for comment from area residents on the possible route and historic sites such a trail might encompass at a hearing Oct. 16 in Carbondale. Although less than 70 miles of the total trail involves Illinois, historians say the Illinois section exacted a greater toll in death and suffering than its miles would indicate.

Large numbers of Cherokees died during the winter of 1838-39 when their westward progress was halted by ice floes on the Mississippi River, according to historical accounts. Some accounts suggest early Illinois settlers harassed the Cherokee, holding the bodies of dead stragglers in order to exact payment for funeral expenses.

Present-day Cherokees want the trail's "infamy" to be remembered, according to Wallace C. Brittain, coordinator of the park service study.

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Federal legislation supported by representatives of Southeastern U.S. states containing Cherokee home-

lands mandated the study, Brittain said. While it appears unquestionable that the events leading up to the dislocation of the Eastern Cherokee Indians are of national significance, Brittain says the physical concept of existing National Historic Trails will not fit the Trail of Tears.

Thirteen separate groups of Cherokees traveled the distance to Oklahoma. Some traveled on foot, taking different routes and variations of a main route. One group traveled by paddle boat, arriving in Oklahoma via the Arkansas River.

Brittain believes many of the overland routes may now have become paved roads and highways.

"We may be looking at a lot of 'signing' on existing roads," Brittain said.

At least four states are vying for recognition as the eastern starting point of the trail, Brittain said. The Cherokee were rounded up at different locations in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina to begin the march. At least one state — Tennessee — has already designated a Trail of Tears scenic trail.

Brittain says little information has been collected by his agency on the actual routes followed by the trail,

or the events that occurred along it.

"That's one of the purposes of the meeting," he said, "to ferret out as much information as possible." The park service plans to hold at least one hearing in each of the nine states crossed by the trail.

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The main trail apparently passed through Dixon Springs, Vienna and Jonesboro, eventually crossing the Mississippi River at a spot known as Willard's Landing.

The passage across Southern Illinois in mid-winter was especially difficult because the Cherokee were not used to extreme winter temperatures and were not equipped to withstand them. Unlike Western Indians, the Cherokee were a settled tribe, living in log cabins and accumulating considerable wealth.

The Cherokee Nation had adopted its own constitution, modeled after the U.S. Constitution, as well as a written alphabet.

The relocation of the Cherokee, demanded by President Andrew Jackson despite a Supreme Court decision to the contrary, held many ironies for historians. One Cherokee brave had reputedly saved Jackson's life in battle during Jackson's military career.

"I think the real significance was that it was a forced military removal, the first of its kind," Brittain said.

One Southern Illinois historian might have been glad to know the historic trail designation would be considered.

John W. D. Allen, in his book, "It Happened in Southern Illinois," speculated on historic journeys in Southern Illinois he would find interesting to retrace.

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