



By Lew Larkin

(A Member of The Star's Staff)

IN the Trail of Tears State park at Cape Girardeau stands the Princess Otahki monument. And 13 miles south of Farmington lies the Cherokee Trail Roadside park.

The two recall the "Trail of Tears" of 17,000 Cherokees in the winter of 1838-39, when the tribesmen, driven from their homes in the Southeastern states, passed through Missouri on the way to Oklahoma. Though the state had no part in the atrocity, it has acted to memorialize the nation's cruelty against a defenseless minority.

In 1956 Cape Girardeau County voters approved a \$150,000 bond issue for the purchase of a 3,000-acre tract of Missouri river hill land as a scenic site for the Trail of Tears park. The Cherokees have erected there a simple memorial to Princess Otahki, one of their number.

Driven from their old homes by U. S. soldiers, the Indians crossed the Mississippi river and stepped on Missouri soil for the first time at Cape Girardeau. Missourians watched the silent figures in creaking wagons, on horseback and afoot; weary, hungry and cold; exhausted mothers carrying sick children, old men wracked with coughs, once proud braves cowed and beaten, and all wondering why the President of the United States whose life they once saved would treat them this way.

Of the 17,000 Cherokees in various groups who started from several Southern states in 1838 and 1839 for Oklahoma, 4,000 perished along the way.

The state of Georgia five years ago dedicated New Echota, the restored capital of the old Cherokee nation, for which the Georgia Legislature appropriated \$95,000. Gov. Ernest Vandiver recalled, by way of apology, that a predecessor had asked for and got federal troops to launch the exodus.

What he did not recall, however, were the bands of lawless white men, called "Pony Clubs," who looted the homes of the Cherokees, seized horses, cattle and possessions and then set fire to the houses. If a perpetrator just happened to be arrested and brought to trial the charge was dismissed because the Caucasian Legislature had passed a law that an Indian could not testify against a white man.

THE Cherokees were one of the civilized tribes of North America. They were a nation, with schools, a newspaper, churches and a government. They were hard-working, thrifty and loyal.

They signed their first treaty with whites in 1684, helped South Carolina in its war against the savage Tuscarora Indians; aided Gen. James Oglethorpe, English founder of the colony of Georgia, in his war against the Spaniards, and some helped George Washington in the Revolutionary war. Washington wrote letters and made speeches for his friends, the Cherokees, and when he heard of an attack by white men on a Cherokee town he issued a proclamation castigating the attack and offered a personal reward of \$500 for either the capture or identification of the attackers.

Many times the Cherokees joined the whites in fighting against their ethnic brothers. In addition to the Tuscaroras, they helped Gen. Andrew Jackson in his war against the Creek Indians and saved his life in the battle of Horseshoe Bend, when he was on the verge of defeat.

So, it was difficult to understand the vehemence with which President Jackson put through the exodus and removal orders, and those Cherokees from the Great Smoky mountains of Tennessee who passed the Jackson home near Nashville kept their heads bowed and their eyes to the ground.

ON the floor of the United States Senate, Daniel Webster thundered, "There is a strong and growing feeling in the country that great wrong has been done to the Cherokees."

Davy Crockett, then a congressman, said on the floor that the treatment was "unjust, dishonest, cruel and short-sighted in the extreme." Sam Houston, who lived with the Cherokees at times and was officially adopted by the tribe, pleaded on the Senate floor for mercy and begged his old friend, Jackson, to relent, but to no avail.

The worst part of the trek was across Missouri where severe winter weather caused hardships.

But the Missourians of that era needed to make no apologies for their treatment of the Cherokees. They aided the Indians at every turn in their trek across Southern Missouri. Food, clothing, shelter and medicines were provided. The ill, infirm and those unable to walk were left behind with Missouri families to recuperate, and many were nursed back to a point where they could rejoin the slow-moving procession. Many Missourians aided in burial rites, because every day several died.