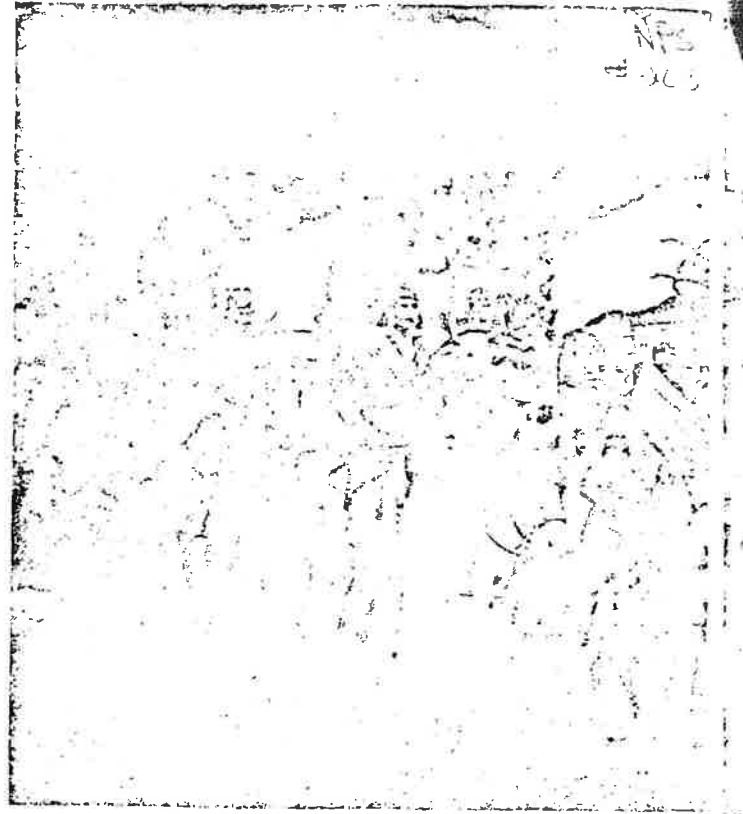


Retracing the Trail of Tears

by Nancy O. Lurie



CHEROKEE TRAGEDY, by Thurman Wilkins. *The Macmillan Company*, \$10.00; 393 pp., illus.

The story of the "Trail of Tears," the Cherokee trek from their eastern homeland to Oklahoma during the years 1827 to 1839 has been told many times and from many points of view. Thurman Wilkins opens his narrative with the June, 1839, murders (or executions, a matter of strongly divided opinion among the Cherokee) of three Indians: Major Ridge, his son John, and his brother's son, who had taken the white name Elias Boudinot.

The elder Ridge, commissioned in the War of 1812, had fought beside Andrew Jackson and was convinced that Jackson had only the Indians' best interests at heart. Illiterate and virtually monolingual to the end of his life, Major Ridge was, nevertheless, a successful planter in the southern, slave-owning pattern. He saw to it that his son and young Boudinot received the finest education possible so that they might serve their people. Following initial schooling near home, the boys were sent to a missionary training academy at Cornwall, Massachusetts. In time both brought home white brides. Reviled for their presumption as crude savages by racist New Englanders, they were memorialized, with equal inaccuracy, as simple and noble sons of

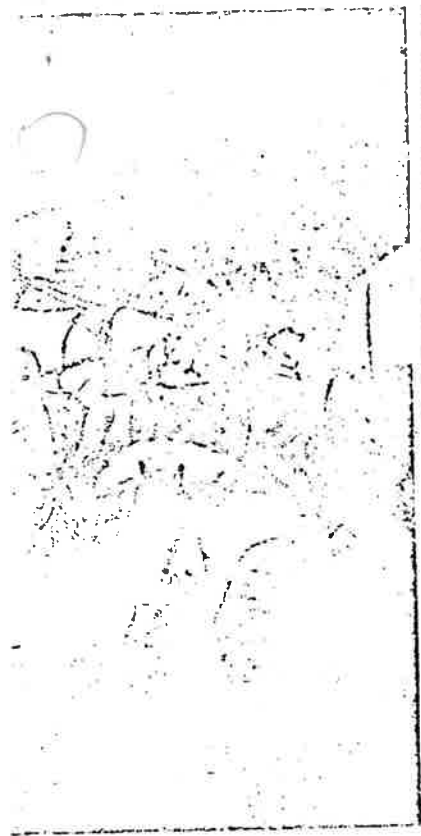
the forest in the sentimental poetry of the day.

These two highly intelligent and well-educated men, along with the elder Ridge, were as much products as leaders of the astonishing Cherokee cultural florescence that, in the space of a generation, turned a tribal people into a nascent modern nation with its own constitutional government, laws, towns, roads, businesses, and newspaper. While the Ridges, Boudinot, and a few others were exceptional in their standard of living, they shared with the majority of Cherokee those customs and attitudes derived from native tradition that welded the group together as a people desiring their own national identity. Wilkins tends to overlook this strength of cultural persistence, seeing the Cherokee's achievements as imitations of white standards rather than as uniquely Cherokee adaptations of innovations from white culture. However, he does note that common allegiance and mutual understanding between the most educated and the most traditional Cherokee were made possible by the incredible intellectual feat of one man, Sequoyah. His invention of an eighty-six-symbol syllabary led to the entire Cherokee nation becoming literate in its own tongue practically overnight, relieving it of dependence on English, which could be written, as the official language of state.

But the Cherokee's amazing prog-

ress was denigrated and resented by whites covetous of their land. One group of Cherokee gave up the struggle as early as 1809 and sold out, settling in Arkansas. The rest parted reluctantly with a good deal of their territory but retained their Georgia holdings, vowing not to sell another foot of land. The Ridges and Boudinot were particularly opposed to land sale. The old major journeyed to all the Cherokee settlements and homesteads, inveighing against the blandishments of the federal government and the threats of the state of Georgia to induce the Cherokee to sell their land and move west.

Like that of all Indians at the time, the Cherokee's legal and political status was equivocal. Their lands within the boundaries of Georgia were under federal jurisdiction but they were not citizens of the United States or protected by the laws of Georgia. When Georgia declared the Cherokee's government null and void and proceeded to appropriate property and harass the Indians and their missionary supporters, the Cherokee sought recourse before the United States Supreme Court. In 1831 and 1832 Chief Justice Marshall handed down decisions favoring the rights of the Cherokee Nation in principle, but he could offer no means of enforcing the decisions. Jackson continued pressing for removal. By 1834, the Ridges and Boudinot became con-



The Trail of Tears, by Robert Lindneux

vinc what the situation was really hop Reversing their stand completely, they now argued for the necessity of immediate removal to get the best price possible for the Cherokee land before it was simply taken by the whites and they were driven off.

In this, however, they were opposed by the Cherokee's elected principal chief, John Ross. While of more white than Indian ancestry and able to speak Cherokee only haltingly, Ross was married to a full blood and shared a life-style and outlook more typically Cherokee than the Ridges'. He argued for procrastinating on treaty talk until Jackson was out of office, recognizing, as the elder Ridge could not, that Jackson was no friend of the Indians. The issue became one of either remaining attached to the Cherokee homeland or maintaining the nation and its achievements intact by moving west. The Ridges were convinced that remaining in Georgia would mean the destruction of the Cherokee as a people. The Treaty of New Echota, Georgia, was signed in 1835 by the leaders in the Ridge faction and provided what was deemed a fair price for the land and its improvements as well for proper transport of the people and their goods.

The Ridges and the few other prosperous people removed themselves to Oklahoma in relative comfort shortly after the signing. They immediately established thriving homesteads and

businesses and placed themselves under the 1809 "Old Settlers" government, which had been modeled after that of the Cherokee Nation in the east but lacked many of its refinements.

Meanwhile, Ross's forces resisted removal, and when finally they assembled or were forcibly rounded up and began moving west, a combination of maltreatment by undisciplined soldiers, bad weather, and epidemic diseases resulted in the tragedy known as the "Trail of Tears." As the pitiful survivors began arriving in Oklahoma, the Ridge faction blamed Ross for bringing disaster down on the Cherokee people. But those who had traveled the Trail of Tears blamed the Ridges and Boudinot for the whole idea of the land sale and removal.

Ross was still principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, and he and his followers insisted the Old Settlers give up their government and accept the eastern constitution, laws, and elected officers. The schism deepened when the Ridges and their followers sided with the Old Settlers despite their earlier talk in Georgia that removal would preserve the Cherokee Nation and its political achievements. Rumors abounded, reinforced by their apparent wealth even after removal, that the Ridges and Boudinot had been bribed to sell the Cherokee homeland, and members of the Ross faction decided to execute them in accordance with the "blood law" traditionally enforced against traitors. The plot was kept secret from Ross, who would have surely opposed it.

The violent deaths of the Ridges and Boudinot evoked counter hostilities. When the factional turmoil finally began to subside, it was revived by the Civil War. The Ross faction fought on the side of the Union while the Ridge Treaty Party and the Old Settlers enlisted in the Confederacy. Wilkins ends the story at this point with the observation that it is fruitless to argue whether Ross was really right and the Ridges should have continued their stand against removal. Actually, history seems to have supported Ross. Wilkins does not mention the Cherokee who hid out in North Carolina, once also Cherokee land, and in time managed to buy land through friendly white intermediaries and have it declared a federally protected reservation. The Cherokee Nation of the 1830's no longer exists in either North Carolina or Oklahoma, but as a group the eastern Cherokee with their own elected officers are considerably better off socioeconomically than the majority of

poor, reservationless Oklahoma Cherokee whose leadership is in the hands of a minority of wealthy mixed bloods appointed by the president.

However, for the period Wilkins covers, his exceptionally well-researched book is an important contribution to our knowledge of the Cherokee. He has made the best case yet that the Ridges and Boudinot were honorable, sincere men working in what they felt to be the best interests of their people. While their strategy failed to preserve the Cherokee Nation, they were not tempted by bribes to sell out their people.

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More Reviews

THE HIDDEN SEA, by Douglas Faulkner and C. Lavett Smith. *The Viking Press, \$14.95; 148 pp., illus.*

Here is a chance for those less adventurous than undersea, free-lance photographer Douglas Faulkner and less knowledgeable than C. Lavett Smith, curator of ichthyology at The American Museum, to visit vicariously the depths of the ocean and learn something of the animal life that abounds there. This 148-page guided tour carries a \$14.95 fare.

This quarto is really a picture book for adults. Because the seventy full-color plates are either whole-page or double-page reproductions, most of the subject matter is presented at life-size or larger. All the photography was done underwater at depths ranging from one foot to 240 feet. Faulkner labored seven years and traveled under most of the oceans of the world in making this collection.

The subject matter is spectacular and bizarre, and the close-up photography set against a dark backdrop is that of a master. The most entertaining pictures are those showing a pugnacious lobster threatening the camera lens, a starfish at dinner, a Jonah's eye view of a gaping sea bass, a typical female crab exchanging her