

Trail Of Tears Tale Too Good To Bother With Facts

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The problem with some of our accounts of history is that they have been manipulated to fit conclusions not borne out by facts. Nothing could be more intellectually dishonest. This is about a vivid case in point.

Congress recently passed a bill, later approved by President Reagan, to memorialize as a National Historic Trail what both professional and amateur historians call the Cherokee Indian Trail of Tears. The trail is the route by which the Cherokees moved west from their Georgia-Tennessee-Carolinas homeland into what is now Oklahoma.

The act caused a spate of articles about how the Cherokees lost 4,000 or more dead on a terrible trek, described as a "forced" march, presumably indicating they were prodded by bullet and bayonet as they moved during the hard winter of 1837-38.

The oddities are: 1) Voluminous records, including those of the Cherokee nation itself, show no loss approaching 4,000 (an actual figure of about 840 deaths was bad enough); 2) The word "forced" insults the Cherokees because they conducted their own march, paid for by Washington; 3) The phrase "Trail of Tears" was never used by a Cherokee in the 1830s, it came into existence under other circumstances about 70 years later.

Indian Removal Policy

How could such distortions have become embedded in accounts of a publicly debated episode with such political overtones? Approaching that question requires some background.

Cherokee removal was part of the enforcement of U.S. law and policy. Years before, President Thomas Jefferson had advocated removing Indians out of reach of rapidly oncoming white settlement. In 1802 the United States had guaranteed Georgia it would wipe out Indian title to lands in that state.

Congress finally enacted, effective in 1830, a law screening the transfer of all eastern Indians to open lands west of the Mississippi River. Some Indians had already gone there.

Those in favor of the policy, led by Presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, held that it was the only way to prevent white settlers from

exterminating the Indians. Those against, mainly Whig Party opponents of Jacksonian democracy and eastern Protestant religionists, said it was simply a case of land-hungry whites stealing Indian lands.

With much political help but no success, the Cherokees, one of the major Indian tribes, delayed their own removal until the United States sent the military to round up their members from their hill-country homes in preparation to going west.

The Cherokees were a mixed lot. Their chief, John Ross, was only one-eighth Indian. A 1835 census showed 23% of the tribe had white blood. The Cherokee elite kept black slaves, as did leaders of other advanced southern Indian tribes. The Cherokees had adopted their own constitution, a move their opponents said violated the U.S. Constitution.

Ross gave up the fight after about 5,000 Cherokees had gone ahead, many at their own request, some with military escort, and made a deal with Gen. Winfield Scott. Under the agreement the remaining Cherokees would move themselves, under their own leadership, hiring their own help, using money advanced by the United States.

Becoming Historic Gospel

The Cherokees employed doctors for each group. One was Elizur Butler, a resident medical missionary who worked for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a Harvard-based Protestant group.

Back from his own effort, and before the last parties had even reached western Indian territory, Butler reported to the ABCFM the 4,000 deaths figure, which he said was "not extravagant." His letter is on file at Harvard.

An ABCFM history published in 1840 picked up Butler's figure, which Butler himself stated was based on hearsay and guesswork. From there the figure started on its way to historic gospel.

Cherokee removal was investigated by Congress to an extent that can be believed only by reading the Congressional Record. Some reports run to hundreds of pages. The written military record exists in detail in U.S. archives. Nothing like an extravagant death toll among the Cherokees exists. Butler is the sole source for such a conclusion. No historian mentions that.

In the Cherokee nation's own files, now on deposit in the Gilcrease Institute in Tulsa, Okla., the number of Indians departing the East in 13 main parties is recorded at 12,623, the arrivals West at 12,783. Some stragglers joined on the way. American military counts are almost the same. The Cherokees were being paid per Indian moved.

T. Hartley Crawford, head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, reported on Aug. 6, 1840, in a private communication to the secretary of war that the death toll among the 13 groups was 447. He also said that Lewis Ross, John Ross's brother, who was supplier to the movement, made a large profit. Historians have never used the Crawford document or, for that matter, the Cherokee documents.

Other deaths, raising the total to more than 800, took place in parties outside the main groups and were carefully reported to the U.S. government. John Ross never made unusual claims for deaths, although he returned to Washington repeatedly after 1838 seeking more money.

All The More Dishonest

The phrase "Trail of Tears" entered the story much later. In 1958 Gaston Litton, former archivist at the University of Oklahoma, attributed it to a remark by a Choctaw Indian to a Baptist preacher about an Indian Territory road. It reached print for the first time in 1908, 70 years after the exodus, when all the participants were dead. From then on it spread like an advertising slogan, as if it came from the mouths of the 1830-40 Cherokee Indians who had never heard or used it.

Indian outrage at removal is understandable. So, too, is opposition to the policy on moral or political grounds or out of sympathy for the Indians. The Cherokees were well-paid. Actual removal costs ran \$2.9 million and by 1849 had gone up another \$3 million. In today's money that would be billions.

The Cherokee removal episode seems to need some historic revision. I, who have spent more than 20 years researching it, doubt anyone will bother. It is too good a story as it stands and too well-fixed to disturb. That makes it all the more dishonest.

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