



The Cherokee Trail of Tears



Nunaihi-Duna-Dlo-lilu-I: The Trail Where They Cried

During the harsh winter of 1838-1839 over 15,000 Cherokee Indians passed through southern Illinois on their *Trail of Tears*. Many hundreds perished from cold and hunger on this long and tortuous trek from their homeland near the Smokey Mountains to new government-designated lands in eastern Oklahoma. It took approximately eleven weeks during the fall and winter to cross the 60 cold and rainy miles between the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

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Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and some 2,000 Cherokee had moved west between 1831 and 1837. However, the majority of the 17,000 Cherokee Indians, did not want to leave their mountain home. General Winfield Scott led an army of 7,000 soldiers into the Cherokee territory. Without warning *"...the Cherokee... (were) dragged from their houses and encamped at the forts and military places all over the nation. Multitudes were allowed no time to take anything with them except the clothes they had on. Females...are driven on feet before the bayonets of brutal men...it is the work of war in time of peace."*

Evan Jones, Baptist Minister, June 1838

Immediately the Cherokee's white neighbors looted the abandoned homes, stealing pots and pans, silverware, and even vandalized graves in search of gold and silver.

Cherokee were divided up into 12 detachments of about 1,000 each. The major route traveled led from present-day Chattanooga, through Nashville and Clarksville, on through Hopkinsville, and entered Illinois after crossing the Ohio River at Golconda, IL.

The days and weeks spent in crossing southern Illinois were the most brutal for the Cherokee Nation. The weather was bitter cold mixed with rain and snow. Many landowners would not allow the Cherokee to camp on their land or cut firewood for warmth and hot food. To make matters worse, ice flows on the Mississippi halted further travel for weeks. The river was frozen solid far out from the river bank and in the center were blocks of ice as big as houses. As the water flowed, the huge ice blocks crashed down the current, rear on edge and crash down with mighty shocks. This fearful noise went on day and night for a month as the Cherokee watched the mighty Mississippi in awed wonder as they waited to cross into Missouri.

Some 1,400 Cherokee had managed to escape this forced migration and remain in the mountains of North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee and Georgia. These Cherokee were also forced to rebuild their lives and livelihood, even though they remained in or near their eastern homeland. Their lands had been confiscated and sold, along with their homes and crops.

The surviving Cherokee eventually made it to Oklahoma in the Spring of 1839 where they began to rebuild their lives and their culture.

... On Tuesday evening we fell in with detachment of the poor Cherokee Indians... multitudes go on feet-even aged females apparently nearly ready to drop into the grave, were traveling with heavy burdens attached to the back on the sometimes frozen ground and sometimes muddy streets with no covering for the feet except what nature had given them.

New York Observer,
January 26, 1839

