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John's Walk

On a cold, drizzling morning John was escorted away from his home with many of his family members. He was allowed to grab few things and only what he could carry. His family cried as they were all gathered up, and led to stockades while every person was found. Tools were left in the field, food was left on the tables and even family pets were left behind. Those who couldn't walk were loaded in to wagons and those who could were ushered around them. A Woman from John's family said:

"The ... people would come into their houses and look things over and when they found something that they liked, they would say, "This is mine, I am going to have it", etc. When they were gathering their things to start they were driven from their homes and collected together like so many cattle. Some would try to take along something which they loved, but were forced to leave it, if it was of any size(Burns)."

His people were arrested and dragged from their homes that day. One part of his family was preparing for the burial of a child who had died in the night, the soldiers came and arrested all of the family members, and the child remained there lying on a bear skin rug. No one knows who, if anyone, eventually buried that child (Burnett). Before the wagons left John led the group in prayer. He had a very large family, full of many extended family members. As he and his family moved with the wagon train, they watched their home being ravaged and looted while they had walk away. Some parts of their home were even set ablaze and burned to the ground (National Parks Service). This would be the first of many days of tears(Bird).

A smaller group was taken during the end of summer before the group that John traveled with. They endured the long, treacherous journey suffering with as many five deaths each day due to drought and disease. The heat was unbearable, and many died from dehydration and heat exhaustion. Summer insects also cause many people to fall ill during this time of the summer, and in many places natural food supplies were scarce causing people to become weak from starvation (Bird). The larger group left later in the fall, as requested John's people, but this time would prove no better than the summer journey.

John and the rest of his family began the journey. They would have to walk for what seemed like an eternity. The trek led over harsh terrain and paths few had walked before. Not long into their journey the weather had turned to sleet and freezing rain, and would only get worse as winter came about. The mud was thick and as the weather grew colder causing their shoes to freeze to their feet (Burnett). John's family suffered from illness and exposure, when they were forced from their homes many hadn't time to gather warm clothes or the proper equipment to endure such a journey as this. A woman had only the shawl she was wearing at the time she was removed but it was not enough to keep her or her three children warm when the snow fell and the wind blew. The soldiers who led John's people had few blankets to offer but there was not enough to go around. Some became too weak to continue, but the soldiers would not stop for them (Harris).

One soldier, Private Barnett, had spent a lot of time with John's family during his childhood. They had been walking for so long, the weather had turn bitterly cold and the snow flurried around them. Barnett sympathized with John's family and often gave the children his food rations or let them wear his coat during the freezing nights. He was on patrol the night John's own beloved wife died. She had given her only jacket to a child so the child would not

have to suffer through the freezing night. The exhaustion had made her body weak and she couldn't fight off the cold; she came down with pneumonia and it stole her life away. Many of John's people slipped away from this world in such a way, cold, starving and torn from everything that they knew to be home (Burnett).

Some members of John's family became ill from disease and could walk no more. The sick and weary were set to rest at the side of the walk way and were left behind where they would then rest forever. Some of the family members became ill and were turned away for fear of infecting those around them. They were turned away to face the cold harsh winter alone, and in many cases did not survive (Burnett). In John's family, a man, sick and dying, was set at the side of the road. The man's wife told the soldiers that if he was going to let go of her husband he would need to let her and her three children go as well. The soldier warned them that they would be left to fend for themselves and the woman stood by her word. All she had was a shawl from their home and some honey and flour, which she carried to feed her six-month old baby. She asked if the soldier in charge could spare blankets and food for her children and she was given one blanket and one day's rations. Her husband, barely conscious, said to her with his loving nickname for her (Harris):

“Dear Little Blue Hen, why didn't you take the children and go on, I can't last much longer, and my Soul will rest much easier if I knew you were safe. My body is just dust and will be all right any place.” She replied, “As long as you live I'll be with you, Dear.” Then the Little Blue Hen and her two boys, aged ten and twelve, set about fixing a bed (Harris).”

Others would die due to the harsh condition and there would not be enough time to give them a proper burial. The sick and dying would be left by the side of the road with a bowl of water. One man laid-to-rest in a box made of cedar planks and set by a creek bed, some were laid between two logs or covered with shrubbery, and others still were just left by the wayside at the mercy of the wilderness (Bird).

After three months of walking, John and his family would find themselves in their new home that was given to them by the government. A man by the name of Jackson said this would be better for John's family because they could live out the rest of their lives without the threat of conflict with their neighbors, who were much different from them. John's family mourned the loss of their home where the fathers of their fathers had lived. This new home was nothing like what they had been promised and the dry arid land was much different than the fertile soil of their home lands (PBS).

In the beginning of the nineteenth century the United States was rapidly expanding and needed more land to house its citizens. In the Southeastern United States there were five large Native American tribes: The Cherokee, the Creek, the Chickasaw, the Choctaw and the Seminole Nations. These Nations held large amounts of land in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Florida. The US government had been trying for several years to try to push the Native Americans out of their ancestral lands. Many signed treaties hoping to retain some of their lands by cooperating with the government, treaties that would prove unhelpful in later years (PBS).

This is the story of Chief John Ross and his extended family of the 16,000 Indian people from Five Eastern Native American Nations. They were forced to leave their ancestral homes in

the Southeastern United States to walk along the 800 hundred miles now know as the “Trail of Tears”. By the end of this walk it was the middle of winter in 1839.. President Andrew Jackson felt that the Indian Removal Act was, indeed, for the benefit of the Native Americans, not knowing then that the territorial borders would again encroach upon in later years by the same types of neighbors they had been in conflict with before, white American settlers. Only about 12,000 Native Americans reached the new Indian Territory, now known as Oklahoma. One quarter of them died on this journey, leaving behind 4,000 hastily dug graves dotting the sides of the trail. What awaited them there was nothing like their homes before and nothing like what had been promised them by the United States Government. The dry and dusty ground of Oklahoma was much different than what they were used to. The area was prone to draught and tornadoes and other challenges the Native Americans were not accustom to dealing with. Their new life would be challenging for them than anyone would have expected. Eventually, American Expansion would press in on their borders in later years, and the peace and freedom promised to the Native American tribes who had to endure the “Trail of Tears” would be short lived. And now you know the rest of the story.

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