

CLOSING A CHAPTER ON THE “INDIAN PROBLEM”

The end of the Civil War signaled a renewed effort on the part of the federal government to address “the Indian problem.” During the first half of the century, as white settlers had moved further west, the major effort had focused on removal of tribes east of the Mississippi either through treaties or simply by usurping their land. But now in 1865, soldiers were returning home, the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862 allowing citizens to pay \$1.25 for 160 acres of public land and the discovery of gold, soon found settlers encroaching on previous treaty arrangements. Encounters between tribesmen and pioneers, somewhat diminished during the war, escalated. Although the Custer massacre at the Little Bighorn in 1876 is probably the most well known western conflict, two others much further west involving Modoc and Nez Perce tribesmen had a more direct impact on northeastern Oklahoma.

Because the Five Civilized Tribes had aligned themselves with the Confederate States during the war, the sentiment in Congress was that “all bets were off” as far as treaties with most tribes were concerned. A new attitude, that of Manifest Destiny, the right of inevitable expansion, became the white man’s justification to remove Native Americans as they saw fit. So first, in 1867 small segments of what would eventually become Ottawa County in Oklahoma were carved up and several tribes, many already relocated to Kansas, were forced to move again. Further west, Plains Indian tribes were becoming the target of a federal army, beefed up because of the recent war and motivated by occasional clashes between Indians and pioneers.

During the 1860s, settlers had flooded northern California and as a result of their incursion, the Modoc Tribe signed a treaty in 1864 agreeing to remove to the Klamath Reservation in southern Oregon. Predictably, conditions of the treaty were not met and the next year a small group of Modoc tribesmen under the leadership of Kintpuash, also known as Captain Jack, returned to their homeland just south of the California border. However, complaints from white settlers eventually prompted the government to force their removal back to the reservation. Resisting, tribe members fled to a volcanic lava bed that served as a natural fortification and during January of 1873 a large force of United States Cavalry were held at bay by 51 Modoc warriors, leading to an attempt at peaceful negotiations. During the peace parley, Captain Jack became displeased with proposals and shot the commanding officer, General Edward Canby. Another peace commissioner, Reverend Eleasar Thomas was also killed. Consequently, fighting resumed and within months federal troops prevailed and hung Captain Jack and two others. The 153 surviving members of the tribe were confined, chained together and shipped by cattle car in freezing weather to Indian Territory. Destitute, they were allocated 4,000 acres of land, purchased from the Eastern Shawnee, and left to survive any way they could. Years later, in 1909, those who wished were permitted to return to the Klamath Reservation. Today, remaining members represent the smallest federally recognized tribe in Oklahoma.

In 1878, the Nez Perce were shipped to Oklahoma from Washington State as prisoners of war, first relocated to Ottawa, then later in the same year to Kay County. Years earlier, the tribe had been commended by the federal government for their assistance in saving starving members of the Lewis and Clark expedition, But in 1860, led now by Chief Joseph, gold had been discovered and by 1862, 18,000 miners had overrun their territory of 7.5 million acres. A treaty was signed that reduced land holdings to 1/10 of its previous

size, creating a division in the tribe between “treaty signers” and “non-treaty signers.” This in turn resulted in continuing conflicts with white settlers. As some of the Nez Perce attempted to move to their new allotment in Idaho, they were attacked by federal troops because of depredations to settlers. Fleeing to Montana, they engaged in a battle at Bear Paw Mountain and although defeated, 170 managed to escape to Canada. Under a treaty agreement between Chief Joseph and General Nelson Miles, the remaining members were to be allowed to return to the Idaho reservation however, Washington officials overruled the treaty and ordered them to Indian Territory. Four hundred fifteen men, women and children arrived at the Quapaw agency in 1878 and shortly thereafter were removed to Kay County. However, because of public pressure related to the injustices involving earlier treaties, tribal members were allowed to return to Washington State in 1885.

By the latter part of the 19th century, Indian removal by government force had, for the most part, been completed. But an even bleaker chapter between Native Americans and the Federal Government was about to open, forced assimilation into American society.