

ANOTHER TRAIL OF TEARS?

The Trail of Tears, the removal of the majority of the Cherokee Tribe from Georgia during the winter of 1838-39, is emblazoned in history because of the injustice and suffering that resulted. Several routes, forced marches from Georgia, were taken and each seemed worse than the other. The Jackson administration that perpetrated it was well known for unfair treatment of Native Americans, but who would have suspected similar treatment during the administration of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln?

The Civil War in Indian Territory, particularly among the Cherokees, actually became two wars. Internally, the rancor between those who had signed the treaty for removal from Georgia and those who opposed it had somewhat diminished over the succeeding years, but this new conflict reintroduced that debate, as well as the argument over slavery. Thus, the oft quoted phrase of the Civil War era, "brother against brother," held dual meaning for Cherokees. And, while men and boys took up arms and joined one cause or the other, women, children and the elderly were hopelessly caught in between. Consequently, many attempted to flee out of the Territory to the comparative safety of other entities.

When the war commenced, many fled either north or south from Indian Territory, those favoring the Confederacy to Texas, those supporting the Union to Kansas. Upon their arrival and even though they now were safe from the depredations of war, the refugee's day to day existence remained miserable since they still lacked sufficient food, clothing and shelter. While they probably would not be shot, they could easily starve to death. Consequently, it was with utter disbelief when, during the spring of 1864, W. G. Coffin, Federal Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Kansas, received orders from the United States Congress to remove refugees from the Sac and Fox Agency in Kansas and return them to their old homes in Indian Territory. The agency, located 10 miles southwest of Ottawa had become the refuge for Creeks, Cherokees, Eucheas, Chickasaws and Choctaws and all were to be removed. Coffin questioned Washington regarding the wisdom of bringing these defenseless people, mostly women and children, back into a combat zone, but his appeal fell on deaf ears.

However, not all of his charges would be easily corralled. About 1,900 refugees, mostly Wichita tribesmen, fled from the district and settling near Belmont, Kansas, nearly 100 miles to the southwest. Later, they would move to the confluence of the Big Walnut and Arkansas rivers and develop the settlement that would become Wichita. Coffin, already faced with the monumental task of deporting well over 5,000 refugees, chose not to pursue them.

Addressing the task at hand, Coffin spent weeks acquiring transportation as well as necessary supplies for the journey, and on May 15, 300 wagons and teams were ready, accompanied by a military detachment that included an additional 300 wagons. Strung out in marching order, the wagons alone made a train six miles long, but the caravan was much longer, augmented by thousands of refugees walking ahead and behind. Adults, bearing most of their belongings, clothing, bedding, cooking utensils, were followed by children carrying puppies, chickens and ducks. Trudging south on the Military Road, the unlikely parade struggled through muddy roads and frequent thunderstorms created by spring

rains. Miraculously, there were few casualties. One man was killed by lightning while astride his horse, another drowned fording the Grand River near Fort Gibson and there were six natural deaths, but also 16 births.

On June 15th, exactly one month after leaving Kansas, the motley crowd straggled into Fort Gibson, only to face appalling circumstances. The local Indian agent was already attempting to accommodate 9,000 refugees and now, with 5,000 more from Kansas and still more expected, estimates ran as high as 20,000 to be housed and fed at Fort Gibson! To compound matters, in addition to skirmishes and battles between the two warring factions, bushwackers frequently raided the outskirts of the fort, laying waste to whatever they didn't kill or steal. To add to the misery, if occupants would raise a garden, hidden in the nearby woods, they were often victimized by white men, claiming to have authority to confiscate whatever they grew.

Ironically, even time did not favor the returning refugees. The first international meeting focusing on protecting civilians in wartime was held during the summer of 1864, after their arrival at Fort Gibson. That meeting spawned what would become the Geneva Convention. Unfortunately, since wars have been fought, civilians caught up in combat have been victims of "collateral damage," a term originating during the war in Vietnam. But the mandate given to Superintendent Coffin seems unique even considering the vagaries of any war. Ordering civilians who have fled to safety to be returned to a war zone?

