

I HAVE SIGNED MY OWN DEATH WARRANT

Major Ridge or “The Ridge” as Cherokees back in Georgia called him, had considerable time to reflect on the past as he made his way south on horseback along the Old Line Road that divided Arkansas from Indian Territory. Ridge and his family now residents in what would become Delaware County, lived near Southwest City on Honey Creek, a place his wife Susanna called “an absolute wilderness.” He had to concede that it didn’t compare to their beautiful plantation home in Georgia overlooking the Oostanaula River. There, Ridge had become one of the richest members of the Cherokee tribe, overseeing 280 acres of farmland and managing over 30 slaves as well as a trading post and ferry. Along with his wife, son John and assorted family members, the Ridges had traveled to their new home up the Old Line Road from Fort Smith in the spring of 1837, and established a mercantile business and farm operation. In fact, John had recently returned from a buying trip, first to New Orleans, then New York. So now Ridge could leave to visit a sick slave south of Cincinnati on the Arkansas side, bordering Indian Territory, and maybe go on to Van Buren to see his daughter Sarah, or Sally as the family called her.

As the horse plodded south, Ridge thought about the circumstances that had so dramatically changed the families’ life. By 1800, he had become well known by the tribe as a fearless warrior who had performed gallantly in raids against white pioneers and, shortly thereafter was appointed head of the first Light Horse Patrol, the Cherokee police. Ridge, whose Indian name translated to “The lion who walks on the mountain,” gained even more acclaim during the United States government’s war with the Creeks in 1813 -14. He had distinguished himself during the battle of Horse Shoe Bend and General Andrew Jackson had bestowed the rank of major upon him, thus “The Ridge” became Major Ridge from that time forward.

A strict adherent to Cherokee law, after that war and another conflict with the Seminoles in Florida, Ridge had been an avid supporter of John Ross who became principal chief and appointed him as his counselor. But in the years that followed, they had parted company, Ridge had become resigned to the fact the government was determined to move the tribe out of Georgia, whereas Ross was just as determined that they would not succeed. So, after years of debate, in December of 1835 Ridge, formerly a strict advocate of Cherokee land rights, his son John and nephew Elias Boudinet, among others, signed the Treaty of New Echota. This treaty deeded Cherokee lands to the government in exchange for money and lands to the west that would become Indian Territory. And, as Major Ridge now reflected, it was at that time he had made the observation “I have signed my own death warrant.”

Recalling events that followed signing that treaty, Ridge remembered that first there was disbelief among his fellow Cherokees, then anger followed by threats on the lives of the “treaty signers.” But the dye had been cast and, he and several other families had removed to the new land in comparative comfort, first by train, then steamboat and barge down the Mississippi and up the Arkansas, arriving at Fort Smith a little over two years ago. He recalled the tedious journey north on Line Road after they landed, noting how the road had improved since when they had negotiated fallen trees and forded several streams.

After spending the night with friends in Cincinnati, Major Ridge resumed his journey and his thoughts, focusing on events that followed after his families' arrival at their new home. John Ross and his supporters had finally conceded the inevitable. Ridge had predicted at the time that, "they are strong, we are weak...they are many we are few," and so it had come to pass. Government troops had rounded up Cherokee citizens in stockades, others appropriated their land and belongings and terrible atrocities had occurred. The situation had led Ross to take charge and negotiate a removal the Cherokees themselves would coordinate. But the journey of 16,000 of his countrymen by foot, not train, boat or barge, had begun in the fall of 1838 and that terrible winter had resulted in untold suffering and death. When most of the tribe arrived the following March, Ridge and his family had discussed the possibility of retribution against them, particularly by family members of those who had perished. They would try to remain alert.

Now, June 22, 1839, Ridge paused to water his horse at White Rock Creek, today Little Branch on Highway 59, just a couple of miles north of Dutch Mill. A rustle in the bushes caused him to look up just as the rifles of 10 -12 assailants were fired. Struck five times, Major Ridge died immediately, a victim of a well coordinated series of assassinations that also took the lives of John and Elias Boudinet. Fortunately, another "treaty signer," Stand Watie, was forewarned and barely escaped. Each murder had involved several assassins, as many as 25 in John's case, and certainly no one man was going to challenge "The Ridge," because even at sixty eight he would have been a formidable opponent.

The identity of the assassins is still the subject of debate. Were some of the survivors of the infamous Trail of Tears determined to make someone pay for their misery or the death of loved ones? Was John Ross involved? His wife was one of the journey's casualties. Did the perpetrators seek revenge on the signers for "selling out" the Nation? The mystery and the arguments continue, But what is beyond debate is Ridge's prophecy that "I have signed my own death warrant." Obviously, he had.