

FORCED OUT | WHITE SETTLERS TAKE LAND



Courtesy of the Woolaroc Museum in Bartlesville

Robert Lindneux's 1942 painting, "The Trail of Tears," depicts the forced removal of Cherokees to Indian Territory in 1838 and 1839. Historian Angie Debo has called the Trail of Tears "the most tragic episode in American history."

Marches were brutal to tribes

By **S.E. RUCKMAN**
World Staff Writer

The removal of some Southeastern tribes to Oklahoma was part of a federal policy for dealing with Indians who were increasingly not welcome in their traditional homelands due to growing white settlements.

President Martin Van Buren and the Indian Removal Act of 1830 were the catalysts for the forced march of thousands of Cherokee, Choctaw and Creek Indians.

The Cherokees' travail is arguably the most poignant story about the Trail of Tears. Historians

agree that the removal began with just under 17,000 Cherokees and ended with 4,000 dying along the path from Georgia to what is now northeastern Oklahoma.

The Cherokees did not walk alone to Indian Territory in the early 1800s. They were recorded as bringing more than 400 slaves with them.

The Creeks were considered highly progressive for Indian people of the time and faced near-inhuman conditions during their forced march. Joyce Bear, historic preservation officer of the Creek Nation, said the Creeks' removal was just as brutal and tragic as that of the Cherokees.

"You name it and it happened. We had poor food, cold weather, illness ..." she said. "But there was no choice for us. They (settlers) wanted our land."

The Creeks' forced march was broken into two portions or groups, one the Upper Creeks and another referred to as the Treaty Signers or McIntosh Faction, meaning those who had signed treaties that ceded their homelands under duress with the federal government.

Bear said the very first of the Creeks who walked several months from Georgia in late fall eventually arrived in mid-winter in what is now the city of Coweta

in the 1830s, just east of Tulsa. Once the policy of allotment was adopted, many Creeks were given land in what is now Tulsa proper.

The Choctaws, who originally hailed from the Mississippi area also arrived in the state by forced removal. Like the other Five Civilized Tribes, the Choctaws endured the hardships of leaving farms, lands, families and belongings at the point of a gun.

According to historian Angie Debo, the Seminoles also were not exempt from the push of encroaching white settlement in the Southeast.

"The Seminoles suffered the

most of all. Tricked into a removal treaty, they refused to go and the ensuing Seminole War was the most costly to the United States in lives and money of any Indian war in its history," she wrote in "A History of the Indians of the United States."

Upon the tribes' arrival, they found a land that held other tribes who were relocated to Indian Territory from their traditional homelands. Those tribes included the Quapaw, Seneca, Shawnee, Delaware and Osage among others.

The Trail of Tears chapter has been re-created and examined by political historians since the re-

settlement period in Oklahoma. Cherokee chief Chad Smith said the trek was only the first stage in a process of re-creating a semblance of life that most of the tribes enjoyed prior to relocation.

"Out of nothing, Cherokees built primary schools, seminaries for young men and women, courthouses, the basic infrastructure of a nation — in just a few short years," he said. "It (the walk) changed us forever, but it only showed how strong we are as a people."

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