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IT WAS the early and mid-1830s. Hopkinsville had been settled a scant 40 years and the city largely was a cluster of log buildings, several taverns, a few churches and stores.

It would be another six years before the first wagon train left Missouri for the six-month trip to California.

Flintlock rifles ruled the forests and ours was an economy largely of subsistance farming.

It was against this backdrop that one of the most emotionally stirring events hit Hopkinsville in the fall and winter of 1838. And though almost exclusively spectators, city residents none the less occupied front row seats to a wrenching drama unfolding before them.

In the cruel and thoughtless treatment of the Southern tribes of American Indians in the 1830s is found one of the tragedies of our civilization and a dark spot in the history of a great nation. The transfer of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek and other tribes from their Southern homes to a bleak and barren waste beyond the Mississippi River was for no reason other than the greed of the whites who coveted the rich land of the Southeastern Indian nations.

Conflict with American Indians began almost as soon as Virginians first settled this country and passing years saw little improvement . In April to September 1832, the Black Hawk War pushed Sauk and Fox Indians from Illinois and Wisconsin west across the Mississippi.

In 1835, gold was discovered on Cherokee land in Georgia. The Indians were forced to sign treaties ceding these lands late that year and to cross to new reservations across the Mississippi.

By 1836, Seminole Indians in Florida under Chief Osceola began attacks protesting their forced removal. The unpopular Seminole War was not to end until 1842, costing the lives of 1,500 U.S. soldiers. These Indians, too, were sent to Oklahoma.

The Indian nations had become civilized by any yardstick one might wish to apply and peacefully were occupying lands in Eastern Tennessee, Western North Carolina, Northern Georgia and Alabama, where they had been for 300 years. They had their own schools, churches and villages and had become an industrious and prosperous class of people.

These were not Indians living in tepis, encircling wagon trains dressed in warfeathers and paint. Some of the most sophisticated log dwellings in the Carolinas at that time were the homes of the Cherokees. Some lived in fine brick homes and were on an equal social and economic footing with whites. Black slaves of the Cherokees tended carefully tilled fields, raising abundant crops of tobacco, corn and other staples.

Indeed, the Cherokees were the only tribe with a printed newspaper and a written language, the ingeniously complete and ingeniously simple creation of the Indian Sequoah.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled many of the earlier land treaties invalid and unconstitutional. But president and old Indian fighter Andrew Jackson was firm in his conviction that the Redman shall yield to the white. "John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it.!" thundered Old Hickory on hearing of the Supreme Court decision of Marlboro vs. Madison.

Irony abound in Jackson's attitude toward the Indians since it was the Cherokees rallying to his aid under Chief White Path that helped clinch his victory at New Orleans during the War of 1812 and the in the American victory over the Creeks at bloody Horseshoe Bend.

One of the temptations the historian must avoid is writing and reading of the past in light of current ideas and attitudes. In the 20th century, the Indian and his treatment in the 19th century is on the public conscience. It is an easy notion that after all, the red man was here first and that greedy whites did him a great injustice in pushing him off his land. A small minority of the Cherokee leadership — perhaps 20 men — was duped into signing papers which it did not understand but which stripped them of their heritage and proud independence.

The Indian has become a romantic object of our pity.

To the residents of the southern frontier before the 1820s and 1830s, this thinking would have seemed strange indeed.

To them, the Indians were savages and enemies. Certainly, there were friendly relations between some reds and whites and in some instances, the half-breeds bridged the gap between the races. But in general, suspicion and hostility existed between the two.

Besides, they argued, the concept and mechanics of a nation within a nation were unwieldy.

White settlers moved in because they wanted land which they saw being unused. Many said it was a sin and a crime for the "heathen" to be controlling idle land that Christians wished to farm.

For the white settlers, the stealthy Indian was a menace even after he had given up large parts of the state. The memories of attacks on settlements like Fort Mims and Sinquefield, Alabama, and attacks on isolated individuals remained vivid in the minds of Alabamians until well into the Civil War.

Most families had stories of a father shot in the field, of a mother tomahawked at the spring, of a cabin set afire, or of the dreaded warwhoop.

Even the rumor of an Indian raid would panic a community.

Besides, the Cherokees had fought with the British in the Revolution and a residue of that hatred remained in the first decades of the 19th Century.

We were not more than one generation away from the raw frontier.

In the eyes of most Americans, the removal policy was moral, since it provided payment for eastern land and allotments of western land.

Furthermore, it was practical since it opened up new lands for white settlement and speculation. Only much later did these agreements significantly prick the public conscience.

From the 1820s on, the differences between the races became acute and open hostility was forced upon some of the Indians, most of whom were anxious for peace. These conflicts culminated in 1836 in a much-disputed treaty made at New Echota by a minority of the Cherokee leadership, which provided for the removal of the entire Indian nation of 17,000 people, together with the Creeks and other smaller tribes, to a territory west of the Mississippi River.

After strenouous but fruitless opposition on the part of the majority of the tribe and their many white friends, including such men as Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, the government ordered Gen. Winfield Scott to take the Indians westward in 1838. The Treasury was to have paid $5 million in cash for their 7.8 million acres and supply twice that number of acres in lands to the West. The time of departure was set for May 26, 1838, and Gen. Winfield Scott, with 7,000 infantry and mounted cavalrymen was directed to carry out the order.

Kentuckians, luckily, were spectators only to the arguments flying back and forth over the issue of Indian removal.

History tells us that no Indians lived in Kentucky at that time. It had been the hunting grounds of tribes north of the Ohio River and in the country south of the present boundaries of the state. In general, white settlement of the Commonwealth did not uproot existing Indian civilization .

And so began the formal Indian removal — an 800-mile ordeal etched in their history that they soon dubbed Nunna-da-ul-tsun-yi — "The trail where they cried."

A contemporary account related that "Gen. Scott scattered his troops throughout the Cherokee country, built stockade forts, and the Indians, like cattle, were forced into these stockades in 25 days preparatory to their removal. Men were seized in the fields at work, women at their homes and children while out at play were taken at the point of the bayonet and marched away from their homes. Often, bands of lawless men followed and looted the homes of the Indians in search of pillage and many an Indian in turning his head to take a farewell look at the dearest spot on earth, saw his home being destroyed by flames.

"After gathering about 17,000 Cherokees into the various stockades, about 3,000 of them were brought to Calhoun and Chattanooga, Tenn., and to Guntersville, Ala., placed on boats and sent by water to the west bank of the Mississippi River, and the journey continued by land to the Indian Territory. This removal took place during the hottest period of the year and as a consequence, it was attended with much sickness and many deaths. Of the 3,000 going by water, only 1,800 arrived in Oklahoma, the rest escaped or died," the author wrote.

Under the leadership of Chief John Ross, the Cherokees convened a council at Rattlesnake Springs, Tenn. Their agenda included voting to retain their constitution and laws when they arrived in the West and voting once more to denounce the 1836 treaty that had torn their nation apart.

Carrying out one of the provision of that Cherokee council, Ross and a few other chiefs submitted a proposition to Gen. Scott that the remainder of the Cherokees be permitted to remove themselves later in the year when the danger of sickness was not so great and so that the loss of life accompanying the earlier water route hopefully could be avoided.

Scott granted that request, providing that by Oct. 20, all of them would have started.

"The Cherokee Council appointed officers to attend to the removal, and the Indians were collected into companies of approximately 1,000 each (archive records show the groups ranged in size from 850 to 1,766), with two Indian leaders to each party.

"Including their negro slaves, there were 13,000 Cherokees thus enrolled.

"The Indians who were to undertake their own emigration began at Rattlesnake Springs, near present-day Charleston, Tenn.

In October, 1838, the long expected journey was begun. A few chose to go the longer water route, but nearly 13,000 journeyed by land. The procession of exiles was tragic but picturesque. The army had supplied 645 wagons and 5,000 horses and oxen for the journey. Each family group was issued two or three iron cooking vessels and one blanket per member.

Each of the 1,000-member companies positioned the wagons in the middle of the procession, loaded it with old men, women and children, clinging to their blankets, cooking vessels and other personal property. The monotony of the procession was broken by hundreds of Indians on foot marching in front and riding horseback. Mounted officers riding along the line and in the rear of the procession.

At some points along the way, conditions defied sensibility. Near Cape Girardeau, Mo., the Mississippi was icebound — too treacherous for the flatboat ferries, but not nearly solid enough to walk across — and the procession was compelled to halt until a favorable time when it could be crossed.

The suffering during that period of waiting was so terrible that 60 years was insufficient to soften the memory of old immigrants to the bitterness of the halt.

A similar fate awaited those waiting for the ice on the Ohio to break near Joy, in Livingston Co. Here, under a 40-foot sandstone shelf named Mantle Rock, the Cherokees camped. It was here under the stary skies of winter that the Cherokees, about halfway between their old home and their new, huddled against one another for comfort while old men shivered and newborn babies froze to death.

At times, losses amounted to 20 deaths a day. The total loss of life from disease on the route was estimated at 4,000 — more than one of every three that began the journey failed to finish it.

The roads of Western Kentucky are our pride today. But it is little suprise that administrators of the Indian removal set a target of travelling between 5 and 20 miles a day, based on the network of roads present in the mid 1830s.

In the late 1790s, there was a sort of Indian trail from Nashville, through Hopkinsville and on to the Ohio River at Shawneetown, Ill., as the names now appear. Another trail led from Russellville across to the Ohio River to a point further up. There were salt licks in some places but these trails were made more by the animals than by travellers.

Russellville was the oldest town in Western Kentucky and as settlements were pushed westward, the first road to open was to the Cumberland River at Canton.

It was along this pathway that the claims of Bartholomew Wood at Hopkinsville, Brewer Reeves at Shiloh, Baker at Cadiz and Boyd and Hopson at Canton were staked out and thus became our outposts of civilization. On this crude roadway, the future city of Hopkinsville was laid out and our struggle with the wilderness began.

Consider the typical "improved" road of the period: In 1838, the General Assembly established a state highway still known as the Butler Road from Hopkinsville to Morgantown in Butler County. It was to be 25 feet wide and "the stumps cut low and rounded at the top," and bridges were to be built, where deemed necessary. Travel was mostly on horseback and the small streams were easily forded and there were ferries for the larger ones.

Convenient trees on the banks of small streams were often cut down and made good bridges for the pedestrians.

But despite these "improvements," roads usually remained mud in the winter and dust in summer.

Between 12,000 and 13,000 Indians eventually wound their way through Hopkinsville in the fall and winter of 1838.

William H. Perrin's 1882 history of the county mentions that Maj. John P. Campbell had the contract to feed the Indians here. It was a big job to furnish provisions for 1,000 to 1,200 people every other day, but all accounts relate that the duty was performed efficiently during the month it required them to pass through.

The Hon. James F. Buckner, who lived in Hopkinsville at the time of the removal but later moved to Louisville, gave his personal recollections of the migration four decades later in an article published in a Louisville newspaper.

Among the things he said: "They were divided into detachments of about 1,200 together with their stock; all passed through Hopkinsville.

"The old and infirm were carried in wagons and on horseback. The able-bodied, with their slaves, of whom there were many hundreds, were on foot.

Each detachment was controlled by one or more chiefs. An occasional detachment of soldiers brought up the rear to prevent straggling and to preserve order. Stations were established about 15 miles apart along the road where provision were supplied by contractors, and detachments passed about every 48 hours. The Indians occupied a camp on the east bank of the east fork of Little River, near the city, at what then was Gibson's Mill, later Wood's Mill.

"The Indians were a source of great curiosity and interest to the citizens. The prominent ones, particularly the ministers and their families, were invited to the houses of citizens. The churches were thrown open to them and nearly every night when a detachment was in camp, services were held in some one of the churches.

People from all parts of the county flocked to town to see the Indians in their camp, Meacham reported. In a long line through what is now Ninth Street and passing by the Rock Spring, that is now covered by the I.C. Railroad Depot and approach, they crossed the shallow ford in the river at that time, thence to Seventh Street and westward by the way of Princeton to Golconda, Ill.

Children frequently were born to the squaws during the migration. A child was born in one detachment a few miles east of town. The mother was allowed to drop out and stop in the woods and two squaws were left with her. People in the vicinity furnished them with food. The women camped for the night and the detachment stopped for a day in Hopkinsville and the following day, the mother of the newborn child left with the detachment.

The wealthy people of the detachment were permitted to stop at the hotels and many were guests in private homes, Meacham said.

The Indians were orderly at all times, but it was sad and mournful experience for them, but with the stoicism of their race, they passed into exile.

Buckner continues by saying that "at the head of one of these detachments was Fly Smith, an old man, late a member of the Cherokee Council. He was accompanied by Stephen Forman, a Presbyterian minister, who had been educated at Andover, Mass. On the morning when the detachment was paraded to start on its journey, it was found that Fly Smith was sick and unable to resume his journey.

"His friends were compelled to proceed without him. Forman and his wife remained to take care of him. He was very old, broken in spirit and travelworn. The next detachment came up in charge of White Path. His fame had preceded him and there was great curiosity to see him.

"He was accompanied by Jessy Bushyhead and his family. He was a Baptist minister, well educated, a celebrated orator, and one of the most influential men in the [Cherokee] nation. When the detachment halted at the camping ground in the grove, the fires had been lighted, and the provisions issued, many citizens, myself among them, sought out the tent of White Path. We were met by Bushyhead, and told the chief was ill, and as he believed, would die.

"He was old and feeble and much exhausted by travel. Physicians of the town offered to administer to him, but he declined. He died the next morning. He had lately been president of the Cherokee Council of which Fly Smith was a member.

"They were both buried in the evening on the east bank of the river near the camp in a clump of cedars, and a simple monument placed over each grave. Addresses were delivered in the church by both Bushyhead and Forman to crowded audiences in which sketches were given of the lives of these distinguished chiefs, with occasional allusions to the history and trials of the Cherokees, and while I have since heard many eloquent funeral sermons, yet none more impressive or eloquent than those spoken by these two Indians ministers over the graves of Fly Smith and White Path."

Accounts of the burial reached as far east as coverage in the New York Herald. It was reported that White Path's comrades buried him by the wayside, covering his grave with a simple box and poles bearing streamers around them so that those who followed might observe the spot and remember the faithful old chief. The Herald reported that the chief was buried in a marblized casket, one of simple wood but painted to resemble the coveted stone.

Meacham reported in the 1930s that the grove of trees in which the graves were located had long since been cleared away. The entire site of the camps in the bend of the river then was a well-kept pasture and fat cattle grazed over the

graves of the Indians leaders. That area long since has been subdivided and the graves, though almost unmarked, are trimmed and relatively undamaged.

Both industriousness and integrity survived the march. For in spite of the hardships, the majority survived and re-established an agrarian society amid the hills of northeastern Oklahoma. They established a new government at Tahlequah, ratified a consitution and established the Cherokee National Female Seminary, the first public school for women west of the Mississippi.

With this being the 150th anniversary of the exodus, our collective conscience once again is bothering us. How do we account to ourselves for our actions five generations ago?

In that lies a classic of situational ethics and the riddle of the ages. Are we responsible for the judgement of our great-grandfathers? Are our great grandchildren responsible for the judgements of today?

With the ruffles and flourishes only Washington can muster, the route of the Trail of Tears was made a National Historic Trail this year— but not one cent was allocated for the first trail marker, map or visitors center. Local efforts to mark the event largely have been met with indifference, if not disinterest.

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