

To Know the Past

GRANMA AND GRANPA wanted me to know of the past, for “If ye don’t know the past, then ye will not have a future. If ye don’t know where your people have been, then ye won’t know where your people are going.” And so they told me most of it.

How the government soldiers came. How the Cherokee had farmed the rich valleys and held their mating dances in the spring when life was planted in the ground; when the buck and doe, the cock and peahen exulted in the creation parts they played.

How their harvest festivals were held in the villages as frost turned the pumpkins, reddened the persimmon and hardened the corn. How they prepared for the winter hunts and pledged themselves to The Way.

How the government soldiers came, and told them to sign the paper. Told them the paper meant that the new white settlers would know where they could settle and where they would not take land of the Cherokee. And after they had signed it, more government soldiers came with guns and long knives fixed on their guns. The soldiers said the paper had changed its words. The words now said that the Cherokee must give up his valleys, his homes

and his mountains. He must go far toward the setting sun, where the government had other land for the Cherokee, land that the white man did not want.

How the government soldiers came, and ringed a big valley with their guns, and at night with their campfires. They put the Cherokees in the ring. They brought Cherokees in from other mountains and valleys, in bunches like cattle, and put them in the ring.

After a long time of this, when they had most of the Cherokees, they brought wagons and mules and told the Cherokees they could ride to the land of the setting sun. The Cherokees had nothing left. But they would not ride, and so they saved something. You could not see it or wear it or eat it, but they saved something; and they would not ride. They walked.

Government soldiers rode before them, on each side of them, behind them. The Cherokee men walked and looked straight ahead and would not look down, nor at the soldiers. Their women and their children followed in their footsteps and would not look at the soldiers.

Far behind them, the empty wagons rattled and rumbled and served no use. The wagons could not steal the soul of the Cherokee. The land was stolen from him, his home; but the Cherokee would not let the wagons steal his soul.

As they passed the villages of the white man, people lined the trail to watch them pass. At first, they laughed at how foolish was the Cherokee to walk with the empty wagons rattling behind him. The Cherokee did not turn his head at their laughter, and soon there was no laughter.

And as the Cherokee walked farther from his mountains, he began to die. His soul did not die, nor did it weaken. It was the very young and the very old and the sick.

At first the soldiers let them stop to bury their dead; but then, more died—by the hundreds—by the thousands. More than a third of them were to die on the Trail. The

soldiers said they could only bury their dead every three days; for the soldiers wished to hurry and be finished with the Cherokee. The soldiers said the wagons would carry the dead, but the Cherokee would not put his dead in the wagons. He carried them. Walking.

The little boy carried his dead baby sister, and slept by her at night on the ground. He lifted her in his arms in the morning, and carried her.

The husband carried his dead wife. The son carried his dead mother, his father. The mother carried her dead baby. They carried them in their arms. And walked. And they did not turn their heads to look at the soldiers, nor to look at the people who lined the sides of the Trail to watch them pass. Some of the people cried. But the Cherokee did not cry. Not on the outside, for the Cherokee would not let them see his soul; as he would not ride in the wagons.

And so they called it the Trail of Tears. Not because the Cherokee cried; for he did not. They called it the Trail of Tears for it sounds romantic and speaks of the sorrow of those who stood by the Trail. A death march is not romantic.

You cannot write poetry about the death-stiffened baby in his mother's arms, staring at the jolting sky with eyes that will not close, while his mother walks.

You cannot sing songs of the father laying down the burden of his wife's corpse, to lie by it through the night and to rise and carry it again in the morning—and tell his oldest son to carry the body of his youngest. And do not look . . . nor speak . . . nor cry . . . nor remember the mountains.

It would not be a beautiful song. And so they call it the Trail of Tears.

All of the Cherokee did not go. Some, skilled in the ways of mountains, fled far back into the bosom of her hollows, the raceways of her ridges, and lived with their women and children, always moving.

They set traps for game but sometimes dared not go

back to the traps, for the soldiers had come. They dug the sweet root from the ground, pounded the acorn into meal, cut poke salat from the clearings, and pulled the inner bark from the tree. They fished with their hands under the banks of the cold creeks and moved silent as shadows, a people who were there but not seen (except by a flicker of illusion), not heard; and they left little signs of their living.

But here and there they found friends. The people of Granpa's Pa were mountain bred. They did not lust for land, or profit, but loved the freedom of the mountains, as did the Cherokee.

Granma told how Granpa's Pa had met his wife, Granpa's Ma, and her people. He had seen the faintest of signs on the banks of a creek. He had gone home and brought back a haunch of deer and laid it there in a little clearing. With it, he had laid his gun and his knife. The next morning he came back. The deer haunch was gone, but the gun and the knife were there, and lying beside them was another knife, a long Indian knife, and a tomahawk. He did not take them. Instead he brought ears of corn and laid them by the weapons; he stood and waited a long time.

They came slowly in the late afternoon. Moving through the trees and halting and then coming forward again. Granpa's Pa reached out his hands, and they, a dozen of them—men, women, children—reached out their hands and they touched. Granma said they each had to reach across a long way to do it, but they did.

Granpa's Pa grew up tall and married the youngest of the daughters. They held the hickory marriage stick together and put it in their cabin, and neither of them broke it as long as they lived. She wore the feather of the red-winged blackbird in her hair and so was called Red Wing. Granma said she was slender as a willow wand and sang in the evenings.

Granma and Granpa spoke of his Pa in his last years.

He was an old warrior. He had joined the Confederate raider, John Hunt Morgan, to fight the faraway, faceless monster of "guvmint," that threatened his people and his cabin.

His beard was white. Age was overtaking his gauntness; and now when the winter wind bit through the cracks of his cabin, the old hurts came to life. The saber slash that ran the length of his left arm; the steel had hit the bone, like a meat axe. The flesh had healed, but the bone marrow thumped with pain and reminded him of the "guvmint" men.

He had downed half a jug that night in Kain'tuck, while the boys heated a ramrod over the fire and seared the wound and stopped the blood. He had climbed back in the saddle.

The ankle was the worst of it. He hated the ankle. It was big and cumbersome where the minnie ball had chewed it in passing. He hadn't noticed it at the time. It had been the wild exuberance of a cavalry charge that night in Ohio. The fever for combat, that marked his breed, was running high. There was no fear, only exultation, as the horse moved fast and light over the ground, as the wind whipped a storm in his face. Exultation that brought the rebel Indian yell rumbling from his chest and out his throat, screaming, savage.

That's why a man could get half his leg mangled and not know it. Not until twenty miles farther on, when they reconnoitered in the dark of a mountain hollow, and he stepped from the saddle and his leg buckled under him, the blood sloshing in his boot like a full well bucket, did he notice the ankle.

He relished thinking of that charge. The memory of it softened his hatred for the cane—and the limp.

The worst of the hurts was in the gut; in his side, near the hip. That's where the lead was never taken out. It gnawed, like a rat chewing at a corn crib, night and day;

and never stopped. It was eating away at his insides; and soon now, they would stretch him out on the floor of the mountain cabin and cut him open, like a butchered bull.

The putridness would come out; the gangrene. They would not use anesthetics, just a swig from the mountain jug. And he would die there on the floor, in his blood. No last words; but as they held his arms and legs in the death throes, the old sinewy body would bow up from the floor, and the wild scream of the exulting rebel's challenge to hated government would come from his throat and he would die. Forty years it had taken the "guvmint" lead to kill him.

The century was dying. The time of blood and fighting and death; the time he had met, and by which he had been measured, was dying. There would be a new century, with another people marching and carrying their dead, but he knew only the past—of the Cherokee.

His oldest son had ridden off to the Nations; the next oldest dead in Texas. Now, only Red Wing, as in the beginning, and his youngest son.

He could still ride. He could jump a Morgan horse over a five-rail fence. He still bobbed the horses' tails, out of habit, to leave no tail hair on the brush to be followed.

But the pains were worse and the jug didn't quieten them as it had. He was coming to the time of being spread-eagled on the floor of the cabin. And he knew it.

The fall of year was dying in the Tennessee mountains. The wind bit the last of the leaves from hickory and oak. He stood, that winter afternoon with his son, halfway down the hollow; not admitting that he couldn't climb the mountain anymore.

They watched the naked trees, stark on the ridge against the sky; as though they were studying the winter slant of sun. They would not look at each other.

"Reckin I'll not be leavin' ye much," he said, and laughed soft, "best ye could git from that cabin would

be to touch a lighter knot to it fer a hand warming." His son studied the mountain. "I reckon," he said quietly.

"Ye're a man, full and with family," the old man said, "and I'll not hold ye to a lot . . . 'ceptin' we stretch our hand to clasp any man's as quick as we'll defend what we was give to believe. My time is gone, and now the time will be something I don't know, fer you. I wouldn't know how to live in it . . . no more'n 'Coon Jack. Mind ye've little to meet it with . . . but the mountains'll not change on ye, and ye kin them; and we be honest men with our feelings."

"I mind," the son said. The weak sun had set behind the ridge, and the wind bit sharp. It came hard for the old man to say . . . but he did. ". . . and . . . I . . . kin ye, son."

The son did not speak, but he slipped his arm around the old, skinny shoulders. The shadows of the hollow were deep now and blurred the mountains black on either side of them. They walked slowly in this fashion, the old man touching his cane to the ground, down the hollow to the cabin.

It was the last walk and talk Granpa had with his Pa. I have been many times to their graves; close together, high on a ridge of white oak, where the leaves fall knee-deep in autumn, until they are whipped away by mean winter winds. Where only the hardest Indian violets poke tiny and blue around them in the spring, timid in their presence before the fierce and lasting souls who weathered their time.

The marriage stick is there, hickory and gnarled, unbroken still, and filled with the notches they carved in it each time they had a sorrow, a happiness, a quarrel they had mended. It rests at their heads, holding them together.

And so small are the carved names in the stick, you must get down on your knees to read: Ethan and Red Wing.