

## **John G. Burnett's Story of the Removal of the Cherokees**

I was born in Tennessee, December the 11th, 1810. I grew into manhood fishing in Beaver Creek and roaming through the forest hunting the deer and the wild boar and the timber wolf. Often spending weeks at a time in the solitary wilderness with no companions by my rifle, hunting knife, and a small hatchet that I carried in my belt.

On these long hunting trips I met and became acquainted with many of the Cherokee Indians, hunting with them by day and sleeping around their campfires by night. I learned to speak their language, and they taught me the arts of trailing and building traps and snares.

The removal of Cherokee Indians from their life long homes in the year 1838 found me a young man in the prime of life and a Private soldier in the American Army. Being acquainted with many of the Indians and able to fluently speak their language, I was sent as an interpreter into the Smoky Mountain Country, and witness the execution of the most brutal order in the History of America. I saw the helpless Cherokees arrested and dragged from their homes, and driven at the bayonet point into the stockades. And in the chill of a drizzling rain on an October morning I saw them loaded like cattle or sheep into six hundred and forty-five wagons and started toward the west.

One can never forget the sadness of that morning. Chief John Ross led in prayer and when the bugle sounded and the wagons started rolling many of the children rose to their feet and waved their little hands good-by to their mountain home, knowing they were leaving them forever. Many of these helpless people did not have blankets and many of them had been driven from home barefooted.

On the morning of November the 17th we encountered a terrific sleet and snowstorm with freezing temperatures and from that day until we reached the end of the journey on March the 26th 1839, the sufferings of the Cherokees were awful. The trail of the exiles was a trail of death. They had to sleep in the wagons and on the ground without fire. And I have known as many as twenty-two of them to die in one night.

I made the long journey to the west with the Cherokees and did all that a soldier could do to alleviate their sufferings. When on guard duty at night I have many times walked my beat in my blouse in order that some sick child might have the warmth of my overcoat.

The only trouble that I had with anybody on the entire journey to the west was a brutal teamster by the name of Ben McDonal, who was using his whip on an old feeble Cherokee to hasten him into the wagon. The sight was nearly too much to handle. I attempted to stop him and it ended in a personal encounter. He lashed me across the face, the wire tip of his whip cutting a bad gash in my cheek.

The long painful journey to the west ended March 26th 1839, with 4,000 silent graves reaching from the foothills of the Smoky Mountains to what is known as Indian Territory in the West. Covetousness on the part of the white race was the cause of all that the Cherokee had to suffer.

When Scott invaded the Indian country some of the Cherokees fled of caves and dens in the mountains and were never captured and they are there today. I have intended going there and trying to find them but I have put off going and now I am too feeble to ride that far. The fleeing years have come and gone and old age has overtaken me. I can truthfully say that neither my rifle nor my knife were stained with Cherokee blood.

## Samuel's Memory

It is spring and the leaves are on the trees. I am playing with my friends when white men in uniforms ride up to our home. My mother calls me. I can tell by her voice that something is wrong. Some of the men ride off. My mother tells me to gather my things, but the men don't allow us time to get anything. They enter our homes and begin knocking over pottery and looking into everything. Several men take my mother and me to where their horses are and are held there at gunpoint. The men who rode off return with my father, Elijah. They have taken his rifle and he is walking toward us.

I can feel his anger and frustration. There is nothing he can do. From my mother I feel fear. I am filled with fear, too. What is going on? I was just playing, but now my family and my friends' families are gathered together and told to walk at the point of a bayonet.

They lead us to a stockade. They herd us into this pen like we are cattle. No one was given time to gather any possessions. The nights are still cold in the mountains and we do not have enough blankets to go around. My mother holds me at night to keep me warm. That is the only time I feel safe. I feel her pull me to her tightly. I feel her warm breath in my hair. I feel her softness as I fall asleep at night. As the days pass, more and more of our people are herded into the stockade. I try not to think about my hunger. I am cold.

Several months have passed and still we are in the stockades. My father looks tired. We hear that white men have moved into our homes and are farming our fields. What will happen to us? We are to march west to join the Western Cherokees. I don't want to leave these mountains.

My mother, my aunts and uncles take me aside one day. "Your father died last night," they tell me. My mother and my father's clan members are crying, but I do not understand what this means. I saw him yesterday. He was sick, but still alive. It doesn't seem real. Nothing seems real.

It is now Fall. The stockade is nothing but mud. In the morning it is stiff with frost. By mid-afternoon, it is soft and we are all covered in it. The soldiers suddenly tell us we are to follow them. We are led out of the stockade. The guards all have guns and are watching us closely. My mother keeps me close to her.

We walked for many days. I don't know how long it has been since we left our home. As we walk past white towns, the whites come out to watch us pass. No words are spoken to them. No words are said to us. Still, I wish they would stop staring. I wish it were them walking in this misery and I were watching them. It is because of them that we are walking. I don't understand why, but I know that much. They made us leave our homes. They made us walk to this new place we are heading in the middle of winter. I do not like these people. Still, they stare at me as I walk past.

My mother is coughing now. She looks worn. Her hands and face are burning hot. My aunts and uncles try to take care of me, so she can get better. I just want to sit with her. I want her to stroke my hair, like she used to do. My aunts try to get me to sleep by them, but at night, I creep to her side. When she feels me by her side, she opens her blanket and lets me in. I nestle against her feverish body. I can make it another day, I know, because she is here.

When I went to sleep last night, my mother was gone and coughing worse than usual. When I woke up, she was cold. I tried to wake her up, but she lay there. I kept trying, as hot tears stream down my face.

I hear myself call her name, softly, then louder. She does not answer. My aunt and uncle come over to me to see what is wrong. My aunt looks at my mother. My uncle pulls me from her.

My aunt begins to wail. I will never forget that wail. I did not understand when my father died. My mother's death I do not understand, but I suddenly know that I am alone. I will be forever denied her warmth, the soft fingers in my hair, her gentle breath as we slept. I am alone. I want to cry. I want to scream in rage. I can do nothing.

We bury her in a shallow grave by the road. I will never forget that lonesome hill of stone that is her final bed, as it fades from my sight. I walk with my head turned, watching that small hill as it fades from my sight. The soldiers make us continue walking. My uncle talks to me, trying to comfort me. I walk in loneliness.

I know what it is to hate. I hate those white soldiers who took us from our home. I hate the soldiers who make us keep walking through the snow and ice toward this new home that none of us ever wanted. I hate the people who killed my father and mother.

I hate the white people who lined the road in their woolen clothes that kept them warm, watching us pass. Move of those white people are here to say they are sorry that I am alone. None of them care about my people or me. All they ever saw was the color of our skin. All I see is the color of theirs and I hate them.