

Primary Sources: A Soldier's Account of the Cherokee Trail of Tears

By Private John G. Burnett, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.23.17

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A painting of the Trail of Tears showing Cherokee Native Americans walking west after they were forced by the U.S. government to leave their homes. Al Moldvay/The Denver Post via Getty Images

Editor's Note: In 1830, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. The law allowed President Andrew Jackson new power. He could give land west of the Mississippi River to Native American tribes. In exchange, the Native American tribes had to leave the land where white settlers would live. Many Cherokee Indians thought the law was wrong.

The government gave the Cherokee a choice. They could leave on their own or they would be forced to move. A few years later, soldiers were sent in. The soldiers forced the Cherokee people to march west. On the way, about 6,000 Cherokee died. It was later

called the Trail of Tears. The U.S. soldiers were under the command of General Winfield Scott. One of Scott's soldiers was Private John G. Burnett. Many years later, Burnett wrote the letter below. He wrote it on his 80th birthday.

"I Found A Young Cherokee"

Children, this is my birthday. I am 80 years old. I was born in Tennessee, December 11, 1810. I grew up fishing in Beaver Creek and hunting deer, wild pigs and wolves. I often spent weeks alone in the woods. All I had was my rifle, hunting knife and a small ax. On these long hunting trips, I met many Cherokee Indians. I learned to speak their language. They taught me how to track and build traps.

In the fall of 1829, I found a young Cherokee hiding under a low, flat rock. He had been shot. I took care of him until he was healed. Then we went home to his people together.

"I Signed Up To Be A Soldier"

By 1838, I had become an excellent hunter. I was a young man ready for a new life. I signed up to be a soldier in the U.S. Army. In the same year, the Cherokee Indians were being moved from their homes.

I knew many of the Indians and could speak their language. So, I was sent to the Army group led by General Winfield Scott. There, I saw a most terrible part of American history. I saw women dragged from their homes by soldiers. Native children were taken from their parents.

That October morning, I saw the Cherokee people put into 645 wagons like animals. Their terrible journey west had begun.

"The Wagons Started Rolling"

One can never forget the sadness of that morning. Their leader, Chief John Ross, prayed. A horn sounded. The wagons started rolling. Children waved good-bye to their mountain homes. Many of these helpless people did not have blankets. They were barefoot.

On the morning of November 17, we drove through a sleet and snowstorm. These people had to sleep in the wagons and on the ground without a fire to keep warm. As many as 22 Cherokee died in one night from sickness and the cold. This was a trail of death. The beautiful, brave Christian wife of Chief John Ross died. She froze after giving her only blanket to a sick child.

The long, painful journey west ended on March 26, 1839. Four-thousand silent graves reached from the Smoky Mountains to the new Indian lands in the West. The white people wanted their land. Because of this, the Cherokees had to suffer.

"I Am Telling You What Really Happened"

For hundreds of years, there had been rumors about a rich gold mine in the Smoky Mountains. I thought the rumors might be true. The year before, a little Indian boy sold a piece of gold to a white man. After that, thieves came to their village. They did not care about the rights of the Indians. Cherokee people were shot and killed. Homes were burned. Lands were taken.

Now it is 1890. For so many years The Trail of Tears has been hidden from the young people of today. Schoolchildren do not know that we are living on lands that were taken from a helpless race. They were taken because the white man was greedy. I am telling you what really happened.

I hope you will understand that soldiers like me could not stop it. We had to follow orders.

"The Soldier That Was Good To Us"

About 25 years later, I met some Cherokee soldiers. They were fighting for the South in the Civil War. Most of them were just boys when they were taken from their homes. But they remembered me. I was "the soldier that was good to us." I can truthfully say that I did my best for them when they needed a friend.

But, murder is murder. A killer can hide in the dark or wear a soldier's uniform, too. Somebody must explain the 4,000 silent graves along the Trail of Tears.

I wish I could forget it all. But I still see the picture of 645 wagons filled with the Cherokee people, slowly moving over the frozen ground. Let the history books in the future tell the sad story of tears and dying.

Children, I now end my birthday story. This was written on December 11, 1890.

Quiz

- 1 What is the purpose of the section "I Found A Young Cherokee"?
- (A) to show that Burnett was friendly with the Cherokee before joining the Army
 - (B) to show what it was like for Burnett to grow up all by himself in Tennessee
 - (C) to explain what the Cherokee thought about Burnett when they met him
 - (D) to explain that Burnett still lived in Tennessee on his 80th birthday
- 2 Read the section "I Signed Up To Be A Soldier."
- Which paragraph gives information about why Burnett was sent to the Army group that was moving the Cherokee?
- 3 What is Burnett's point of view about the Cherokee people being forced to move?
- (A) The Cherokee should have fought white people harder to keep their land.
 - (B) The Cherokee suffered unfairly because white people wanted their land.
 - (C) The Cherokee were going to move soon because thieves came to their village.
 - (D) The Cherokee lived on land that was valuable so they should have sold it.
- 4 Which option BEST explains what Burnett thought about the Trail of Tears?
- (A) It was very sad, but the Cherokee children have already forgotten it.
 - (B) It was very sad, but it was more important for the Cherokee to move.
 - (C) It was a terrible thing to do, and it is best to keep it a secret from children.
 - (D) It was a terrible thing to do, and it is important for people to know about it.