

A Personal Reflection on the Trail of Tears Pilgrimage

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John and Sandra Lowen

My skin is pecan-brown, and my eyes have the dark-as-ebony coloring of my African ancestors. My body carries adipose tissue in the same places, and my hair crimps and kinks when it rains. Nevertheless, I never felt quite comfortable in my African-American role – the one designated to me by society because of my external appearance. Nor was my small Irish inheritance, touted in the bearing of other close relatives, enough to fill in the missing puzzle piece of my personality, that portion that dealt with how I felt *inside*, in the spiritual places that derive their existence in our being not by social expectation or even nation of origin; but from the ancient pools in which our ancestors bathed us.

When I was about seven years old, I chanced upon a family album, hidden deep in a drawer under the “good” table linens and placemats we never used. I looked at the Model T cars, the fashions of the 1930s, the quaint old ladies and little brown children spruced up for the occasion of a family photograph.

Then I looked at other faces; chiseled faces, faces with eyes that bored into mine and awakened at once fear and familiarity. *Who were these people?*

Who Were These Indians?



My family was always tight-lipped about their history. They revealed absolutely nothing, which led me for a long time to think I must hail from a long line of the worst villainous thieves, or else people so deep in Witness Protection that they did not recall their own origins. *But who were these Indians and why were they in my family’s album?* My relatives would say only, “They’re family,” and then shut their lips tight. Eventually the albums disappeared; discarded by an overzealous relative anxious to expunge painful family memories.

Slowly, the stories began to emerge, from relatives that valued truth more than secrecy and that hard-to-fool boon to the twenty-first century, Ancestry.com®. Information began to flow in: my mother’s mother was full-blood Cherokee—a medicine woman. Her husband was Irish and Cherokee. My father was a quarter Cherokee from his mother’s side and Pawnee and African from his father’s side. And we were not confined to North and South Carolina, where our more astute predecessors hid from the government troops attempting to send them to the other side of the mountains. Some went on the Long March. Our family members turned up in Oklahoma and Arkansas and Tennessee and Kentucky.

Some died before they could arrive.

One such person was my mother's great aunt, known to us only as "Chi-Chi," obviously a pet name for a much longer one that is lost to us now. Surveyors came to her land as early as 1819, and the government troops began building forts; ostensibly to deal with possible Native uprisings. But Chi-Chi knew nothing of this; it was before her time.

Then there came a rumor that there was gold on the Indian lands; gold that the Indians knew about. White settlers crossed into tribal lands, panning the rivers and even tracking some of the Native men, hoping in vain that they might find the rumored cache of riches. Although nothing came of the rumors, the Whites still looked on the occupied Indian Territory as a place of concealed wealth; a wealth they wanted. But Chi-Chi knew nothing of this; she stayed close to home, learning the things that young girls learn from their mothers.

Decrees and treaties flew back and forth between the Whites, who coveted the land, and the First People, who saw the land as theirs, because they had occupied it for centuries. As treaty after treaty failed, the reality of a possible removal from the land became more and more probable. Chi-Chi, however, did not know anything about the treaties; even though they were posted, she could not read.

There were tribal councils and discussions among the people: Should they stay or go? Some chose to hide in the mountains; in the limestone caves that underlie the land. Others set off on their own to follow the hoofed-food supply as it also moved west. Others were deeply rooted to their farms and professions. They saw no reason to go, and thus they stayed. Chi-Chi's was such a family, so she also stayed, since that was the family's choice.

A Hot Summer, a Bitter Winter



In the summer of 1836, one of the hottest on record, Chi-Chi and her family were unceremoniously removed from their home and quartered at a local fort. Facilities were poor and the quality of the food was poorer. The heat was insufferable. Disease spread quickly, and many people died. Chi-Chi stayed close to her family members, so she did not die.

Summer cooled into autumn, and there was hope as the soldiers assigned to them moved among them, rousing them to march again. Were they returning to their homelands? But no; the horses turned west, not east; and as the pleasantness went out of the wind that blew, it became clear to almost everyone that this would be a very bad winter — one for which, because of the haste in which they had left their homes and the dearth of materials to construct warm garments or even the knowledge that they might be needed, they were seriously and perhaps fatally ill-prepared. Chi-Chi understood this dimly, but then she had her family around her and no reason to consider anything but that eventually her life would be as it was before. She was told only to follow the heels of the person ahead of her as they trudged the interminable miles of deer-paths and waterfronts that seemed unending. Chi-Chi just did as she was told.

Food came sometimes, ordered from the towns that bordered their route. She looked at it with hope, but found it to be strange food; nothing like what she would have had back in her village. She tasted it and found it putrid: spoiled. Though others urged her to eat it for her strength, Chi-Chi saw others gripping their bellies and discharging their bowels without intention or control. Chi-Chi nibbled at whatever seemed edible, but mostly her belly was empty. Nor was the water good. It was tainted with something that made people vomit. Chi-Chi learned to take her water from the leaves of the plants they passed on the trail. Still, her mouth was often dry.

Winter howled like the coyotes that surrounded their campsites. The bitter fingers of cold wind and freezing rain stabbed at her through her clothing. Old grandfathers coughed and wheezed and grew too weary to respond anymore to the soldiers' fixed bayonets poking at their threadbare jackets. Mothers

struggled in vain to shush their babies that cried for food from breasts that no longer gave. Soldiers circulated among them; sometimes only with curses and slaps, but sometimes they would seize a baby from its mother and — then the only crying would be the keening of the mother as she dug a shallow place in the soil for her baby's shattered corpse with her last ounce of strength; no deeper than she had strength and time to, but deep enough to hopefully protect it from the buzzards that swooped overhead and the wild carrion animals that slouched behind them, ready to cleanse the trail for the next group of travelers. Chi-Chi averted her eyes. There was too much sadness for her heart to bear.

At times, White settlers from the odd habitations along their trail came out to watch them pass: a lugubrious procession toward an uncertain place, its mourners in funereal two-step. Those that did not taunt and berate them felt their pain. Women cried, and men turned their faces away. Chi-Chi felt nothing. Her frostbitten feet were weary and painful. Still she shuffled on, trying to keep silence so that she would not annoy the soldiers.

Sometimes people ran away. Chi-Chi would not have dared to. She had no protection from the wild animals, nor was she able to match the soldiers' bullets, nor did she have the ability, with her feet in such bad shape. She dropped further and further back in the line. Her family's listless eyes did not track her, nor did neighbors that formerly would have urged her on even look her way. She tried hard to keep up, but it was becoming harder and harder.

Death on the Trail



And now snow was beginning to fall in flakes that appeared, to Chi-Chi to be as big as teacups. At first she was happy, because she could catch a few in her bare hands and drink them in to stanch her thirst. But then they grew thicker, and they piled up on the ground, making the way underfoot slushy and then slick. Young braves, made weak from the labor of *walking*, without adequate food, slipped and clung to trees for support.

Mercifully, the line stopped; they would bed for the night. Chi-Chi hobbled ahead a bit, vainly hoping to find her family, but in the gathering darkness they were nowhere to be seen. Several people huddled around a fire, and she started toward it, but could not get near enough. She saw, just out of range of the firelight, an old grandmother. Chi-Chi went to her and leaned against her for warmth, but the old woman had none to give; she was stiff and cooling rapidly. Still, Chi-Chi lay with her head in the grandmother's lap and covered herself with an end of the woman's shawl, draped about her like a blanket. She listened hard, but could hear no sound of a child's laugh or a baby's 'here-I-am' cry. There was no sound of the kind of noises that mothers and fathers make when they think the children are asleep. There was no sound of singing; no comfortable conversation, no bird-song. There was only the *plop-plop* of the saucer-sized snowflakes and the occasional curse of a soldier and the popping sound of a fire that she could not feel warmth from. Chi-Chi smelled the tobacco in this Grandmother's medicine bag. It brought back the memories: her father's pipe, her mother's skin, the smells from a cooking-pot. She felt the warmth of her mother's arms around her, the warmth of her own home, the warmth of the sun on her back in this black wasteland of a forest. She felt herself drifting to sleep.

In the morning, when the soldiers came to rouse everyone to begin the march through the forest now thick with snow and ice, neither Grandmother nor Chi-Chi rose to join them. A thin youth just shy of maturity noticed them there. He hesitated for a moment, and then approached. It was hard, he thought to take the thin covering from a grandmother; harder still to strip it from the fused and frozen little fingers of a child barely five years old; but then, he had to live too, didn't he? Besides, the soldiers were starting to look in his direction; they were moving again.

Virtually none of the babies, children or older people that started out on the Trail of Tears survived.

Perhaps because of my great, great-aunt Chi-Chi, I have always felt cold. Even on hot days, people have

commented that my hands or feet were like icicles. I sometimes felt her presence as that of a little child, shyly clinging to my left leg. In all probability, no one sang her an honor song so that she could be released from earth; there was a good chance that she did not even know that she died in those woods.

When I heard about the Trail of Tears proposed pilgrimage, I was on the West Coast, where I had been for the last several months, assisting my daughter-in-law with the care of our first grandson. Certainly it took a powerful force to wrench me away from what I was doing.

How My Journey Began



Sandra Lowen, completed the Trail of Tears Prayer Journey with seven other people

Most amazing was that I received the flyer at all. With my new computer, apparently a lot of things go to my spam folder, which I have no idea how to open. But this flyer escaped the Spam Seekers. I was immediately moved when I read it, and my husband and I drove across country so that I could arrive on time for it. I took a train from Albany, NY where I live, to Virginia, where the group elected to depart.

I was a little disappointed at the size of the group; only seven people making the complete journey. However, in retrospect, it was the “right” size, as were many of the events along the trail. As I expect there will be many comments on the actual events of the trail, I will share my insights and spiritual observations that are uniquely mine.



Sandra Lowen and Katherine Cromwell (left), who is a representative of Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP)-Virginia.

First of all, I was saddened to hear that there were no honor songs sung for the people that had lost their lives. It was as if they had been forgotten by those that they knew all their lives. When Chief Akeem sang the Honor Song for them at the Wiping of the Tears ceremony, there arose a wind. I felt that the spirits of these departed people, who had suffered so much neglect and insult, from the most ancient elder to the smallest baby with life, came to that circle to hear that song and to witness their lives celebrated and their existence given meaning. Along the trail, as we prayed, I saw a bright light appear from the sky, and many Native people were swept up into it.

Seeing My Ancestor

Most amazing, however, was my experience of Chi-Chi. When I stood before Elder Akeem to be smudged and to receive his blessing, I happened to look over his left shoulder. Because I possess a certain clairvoyance and clairaudience, I was not too surprised by what I experienced. It was in an altered time; an eye-blink; but what I experienced will stand in my mind for the ages. I heard a child’s voice say, “If I go (into the light and knowledge of the spirit realms) will I still be able to play with David?” ‘David’ is

our grandson's name, and at this writing he is not quite five months old. I told her she would have to learn how, so that she did not hurt him, and of course she would need his permission. There then materialized before my eyes a little girl of four or five, squatting on the ground in a way that I frequently squat. She had two long braids and I could not identify her clothing, but her legs were bare and she wore a kind of moccasin and beaded clothing. This little girl looked up at me with her bright eyes and beautiful face, then picked up a kind of doll or bear or perhaps some toy she had made, turned and danced into the sunlight, where she blended with the pattern of the leaves and became invisible to me. Surely, deprived of life at such an early age, one would think I would have been able to feel her resentment. Chi-Chi had no resentment. As most children do, she had just accepted the changes in her life and her untimely death as the way things were supposed to be. Now she can have her life and the tremendous and beautiful lives of those that succeeded her explained in a way she can understand, because she has heard her honor song and moved on.



I could not help but think of all of those that remain unmourned and uncelebrated: soldiers from the Civil War that died unsung on the battlefields; slaves that died at the hands of their masters in a strange land far from home; those that did not survive the ravages of that first winter at Plymouth, and those that gave up their food on the *Mayflower*, so that the hardier of their party could survive. Many settlers died at the hands of the Native Americans and many Native Americans died at the hands of the settlers. Japanese loyal to America died in internment camps during World War II. Young people die daily in the streets of our cities because of drugs, poverty and rising violence. As a clinical therapist, I have grown fascinated with the proliferation of movies about vampires, zombies and aliens. Perhaps what Hollywood is perceiving is the cry of those still unable to settle in the world of the spirit. Perhaps, like pesky flies that buzz around us to be released or killed, these unsettled souls are calling out to us to help them get to their final home.



“The dead are not powerless,” Tom Blue Wolf told our delegation when he addressed us at New Echota, GA, the site from which our journey officially began. If we cannot help them to settle, they will cause us problems. How much of the difficulty we currently experience comes from those that cannot do anything but cause problems because of the circumstances under which they died? Could it be they trying to get our attention to help them move on? It occurs to me that this pilgrimage is only the first of many to liberate an “in-between” place that is in conflict.

Finally, I could not help but consider the man Andrew Jackson. Although his own ancestry has come into question, and he adopted a Native child whose mother was killed during the Revolutionary War, his behavior toward the Native-American population can be called nothing short of reprehensible. This seventh President of the United States, known popularly as the “People’s President,” pushed through the displacement and resettlement not only of the Cherokee Nation, but also those of the Muscogee Creek, Seminole, Choctaw and Chickasaw. He opposed and overruled *two* Supreme Court rulings that declared the First People’s right to their lands, and is quoted as stating “Let’s see them uphold it.” This miserable individual looks up at us from every twenty-dollar bill in our wallets. Why is he on our money, when he performed such reprehensible acts that affected the lives of so many thousands of people? He needs to be liberated, if he has not been already, and his face needs to be replaced by that of a more benign human being.

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