

In Want of Compassion

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It is sympathy that the world lacks, hatred that we cling too, and compassion that we need. History repeats itself in a vicious cycle because of this hatred and bigotry, and there are many horrifying events that prove this and reinforce the need for compassion and sympathy to cleanse hatred and bigotry towards others. The Trail of Tears is the embodiment of human cruelty. The Cherokee people were forced from their land by those whose motives were driven by greed and fear, guns at their backs, and blood-stained soil under their feet. The raw cruelty of the Trail of Tears needs to be fully exposed. Only when we truly know and feel the suffering of others can we feel the *need* and not just the *want* for compassion. Compassion is a necessity, not a luxury; without it, there can be no progress.

My great grandmother walked the Trail of Tears in the unforgiving winter of 1838, and it is with her that I identified the beginning of strong women in my family, the kind I woman I want to become. I have always been proud and intrigued by my family history, and have always wanted to dig deeper into my family tree and pull at the roots that hold me together. The Trail of Tears was something that I heard about in history class, studied for exams, and played little thought to. I viewed it as yet another unfortunate event in history. However, as it is a part of my heritage and my family history, I wanted to learn more. As I dug deeper into my research I thought about my great grandmother, how her words describing the event would be so much richer with emotion, soaked with the empathy of experience and the passion that can only come from living through such an event. The dry history books and lectures in class did not even begin to encompass the pain that surrounds this event; the suffering, the insatiable greed, the hatred, the bigotry; all of this is lost in translation. If everyone felt a personal connection to events like this, if everyone had the scare and the knowledge of pain never to be forgotten, if everyone to gain empathy for events that never touched them in their lives today, then every event would be a tragedy. Everyone would feel as if they had lost a mother, sister, brother, father, or grandparent, and everyone would feel the burning need for tragedies like the Trail of Tears to never happen again.

The Trail of Tears was a tragedy sparked like many others, with onerous greed and the lust for land that can only be quenched by the blood of those who stand upon it. It was in the charged atmosphere of the 1820's that the idea of Indian removal was sparked. The war of 1812, agricultural and population booms added to the lust for the fertile land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River.

In 1818 Indiana and Illinois became states, practically doubling in population; Mississippi and Alabama also joined in statehood in 1817 and 1819. Due to the expansion of the cotton industry, their populations also boomed. Even the older states were reaching a bursting point with all the land within their borders filled to the brim with occupants. All of these circumstances only added to the super charged atmosphere of the 1820's. This intensified need for land increased pressure on Indian tribes to sell their land. The government made treaties with the Cherokees in 1817 and 1819: these treaties contained provisions to encourage them to move west, onto property that had been secured as Indian territory in the region west of Arkansas. However, the majority of Cherokees rejected the idea of abandoning the only home they had ever known (Perdue, Theda, and Michael D Green. *The Cherokee Removal A Brief History With Documents*. Boston: Bedford, 2005. Print.). When the government realized that the migration of small groups of people wasn't going to meet the government's needs for land, they turned to the seed of an idea that had been planted back in 1803: Indian removal. Indian removal was driven by racism, population booms, and the lust for land. Racism made it impossible for people to believe that Indians could be properly "civilized" and integrated into society. This racist thought

pattern was fueled by bigotry and the southern slaveholders who used racism to justify, their slave system. It was justification that made the idea that Indians were racially inferior and therefore less of a person and obliterated the option of integration into society; assimilation and civilization were now out of the equation, so extermination and expulsion were left. Expulsion, the forced removal of a people from their land, was considered as the best, and only option.

The Trail of Tears not only separated the Cherokee people from their land, but it created a rift in the community as well, as the Cherokee fought for their land it became clear that no matter what they did the state and the government would push them out of the only home they had ever known. The Cherokees, to no avail, fought for their land. The National Council had made it known before the Indian removal bill that the Cherokees would cede no more land. The Cherokees, in the face of bigotry and land lust, held onto this bare faced fact and rooted themselves in their defense for their land: the only home they have ever known. The Cherokee people took their case to the Supreme Court; this case was known as Cherokee sovereignty in *Westchester v. Georgia*. In 1832, the court ruled in favor of the Cherokee Sovereignty; however, the government refused to acknowledge the court's decision and planned to forcibly remove the Cherokee people from their land (Joseph, Alvin M, JR. *The Trail of Tears: A Cherokee Legacy 500 Nations*. 1994. Film.). The failure of their last resort and the ever growing tension caused by the state closing in on their land created a breeding ground for greed, fear, jealousy, and pride. This caused a small group (the Treaty Party) to separate themselves from the majority of the Cherokee people. This group was lead by the Cherokee statesman Major Ridge, his son John Ridge, and his nephew Elias Boudinot. The basis of the Treaty Party was built on the conclusion that the Cherokees had no choice but to abandon their land and exchange it for land west of the Mississippi; however, their motives were less than pure. Even though the majority of the Treaty party was made up of high-ranking Cherokees they were not part of the elite class of Cherokees composed of Chief Ross, his brother, and several other prominent leaders. As well as being outranked by Chief Ross and his followers, the Treaty Party had a lot to gain by negotiating with the United States. The Georgia governor exempted the property of the Ridges and Boudinot from the land lottery that was passed by law in 1830—an event that only further increased the tension and fear in the Cherokee community. So, jealousy, jaded ambition, and self-serving outcomes are what motivated the Treaty Party. Most Cherokees were disgusted by the idea of negotiating with the government. The idea of leaving their homeland in exchange for a land they had never heard of or wanted horrified the majority of the Cherokee people, especially Chief John Ross. Chief John Ross and his followers took immediate action against the Treaty Party. The National Council of the Cherokee people impeached the Ridges from their positions in the Council and forced Boudinot to leave his job as the editor of *The Cherokee Phoenix*. Chief Ross was motivated by his principles and the principles that Cherokee government was built on. Cherokees still upheld the belief that their leaders should represent a consensus. If Chief Ross had gone against what the majority of the Cherokee people wanted—to fight the United States and the State of Georgia for their land—then he would have lost his mandate to govern. This was the principal that Chief Ross upheld and fought for; however, the Treaty Party found ways of getting around Chief Ross and the National Council.

The Treaty of New Echota was the Treaty Party's way of getting around Chief Ross and the National council in order to meet their greed driven outcome. The Treaty of New Echota consisted of the cession of all the Nation's lands in the East and for additions to be made to Cherokee lands west of the Mississippi, as well as a payment of five-million dollars to the Cherokees and arranged transportation to the West that included subsistence aid from the United

States government for one year. The Treaty of New Echota was signed during a meeting known only to the Treaty Party. In October 1835 an annual meeting was held at Red Clay where the National Council rejected Ridge's treaty. The United States treaty commissioner proposed a secret meeting at the Cherokee's old capital in Georgia New Echota to the Treaty Party in December. Unaware of the meeting at New Echota, the Ross Delegation returned to Washington. John Ross and the national council fought the treaty and petitioned the United States Senate to reject the treaty. Despite their efforts, the treaty was ratified in the spring of 1836. The Cherokee people were in denial; they couldn't believe that the only home they had ever known was taken from them, and they would have to move to a land they had never known. They made no preparations to leave; they had not stored water or food or supplies of any kind. So, when the United States soldiers arrived in the spring of 1838 to escort the Cherokees to their new home west of the Mississippi, the Cherokee people were by no means ready to take on the grueling journey that would claim many lives and cause irreparable damage in the community.

People were rounded up in stockades, like cattle waiting to be lead to slaughter. Disease spread like wildfire through the poorly supplied stockades, and the unbearable summer heat made for a miserable environment that claimed lives long before they even embarked on the Trail of Tears. When Chief Ross finally come to terms with the reality of the situation, he secured permission for the Cherokee people to orchestrate their own emigration to their new home land that fall; however, it was not until the winter of 1838 that the Cherokee people embarked on the Trail of Tears. This journey was a grueling one. They were forced out of their lands with meager supplies while the government soldiers shot at them. Many died of hunger, exposure, and despair. Even those who survived this migration were permanently affected, the Cherokee as a people were shattered.

There is simply not enough compassion in the world and events like the Trail of Tears are proof of this. There is not enough sympathy, not enough personal ties to the many tragedies that have and continue to happen. With empathy comes compassion, and with compassion comes the courage to stand up and the courage to make changes. When we feel that we have personal connections to events that happen and tragedies that seem a world away, we will have the vigor and the need to do something about it.

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