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Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People: Indian Removal from a Native Perspective

DONNA L. AKERS

In 1830, the United States Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, effectively authorizing President Andrew Jackson to dispossess and forcibly remove thousands of Native people from their homelands in the American Southeast to lands west of the Mississippi River. The Removal Era has been explored by American historians over the years using classic historical methods and sources. They have recorded and analyzed the usual political and economic happenings and the prominent men with which these events are associated. White America's philosophical and cultural beliefs have been examined in an effort to understand the underpinnings of Manifest Destiny and America's insatiable drive for land and dominance. Various racial and political attitudes have been studied, along with economic factors such as the price of cotton on the world market. What has rarely been examined, however, is what Removal meant to Native people, from a Native point of view.[1]

The archives and other written sources that are usually mined by modern scholars are almost exclusively written by non-Native people. Government and military records and accounts, even personal journals and diaries, reflect white authorship. Some of these sources include transcriptions of the speeches and other oral communications made by Native people. But these are, almost without exception, orations that were crafted and intended for white audiences—usually government personnel or national legislatures—and therefore conform to the Native perception of what would be important or meaningful to the larger American culture.

Sources that Native people trust to relate their experiences sometimes differ markedly from those considered valid or reliable by mainstream white historians. Most Native groups passed cultural and historical knowledge from

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generation to generation, not through written records but through oral accounts. Some mainstream scholars distrust oral sources, so often the information available from these records is omitted from the historical record, leaving a one-sided version of American history. Oral narratives contain an illimitable opportunity for Native cultural understanding and knowledge. Although they may evolve over the years, this makes them not less reliable than written records, but more so—*if* one is seeking information regarding the Native perception of events within their cultural context. To understand the historical experience of the Choctaws, it is essential to enter their world to the greatest extent possible. Without an understanding of the Choctaw world, historians only relate the experience of white America.

Sources written in Native languages also are largely excluded from the historical record—usually because of pedestrian difficulties inherent in translation. In addition, however, this is due to the racialist/colonialist thinking of the dominant majority, which discounts the value of Native sources. It would be unthinkable for a French historian not to have a working knowledge of the French language. Why is it acceptable for students of Native people not to be familiar with, or knowledgeable about, the language(s) of the people they are researching? To get at the historical experiences and perspectives of all participants during the Removal Era, therefore, it is necessary to consult the oral as well as the written record—and to examine records written in Native languages as well as European.

In 1830 the Choctaw Nation occupied some of the most fertile lands in North America. In the heart of what would become the Cotton Kingdom, the Choctaws' lands encompassed most of the Mississippi delta lands of Mississippi, as well as regions of Alabama and Louisiana. According to Choctaw traditions, these lands had been Choctaw lands forever, given to them by the Great Spirit, *Chitokaka*. The Choctaws resided in villages along rivers and streams, where they followed a primarily agricultural and sedentary lifestyle.

Choctaw society was based on matrilineal kinship. Clans provided the fundamental Choctaw identity, and heritage was reckoned through the mother's line. During the late eighteenth century, a few white men moved among the Choctaws as traders, adventurers, or outcasts of their own European or American homelands. Some married Choctaw women and spent their lives enveloped in Choctaw society. Since matrilineal kinship provided Choctaw identity, their offspring were fully accepted and reared as Choctaws. The children's first language was Choctaw, and their social training and identity was that of Choctaw children. Their paternal heritage sometimes contributed a rudimentary knowledge of the English language. Their father's occasional Euramerican visitors, as well as the tribe's participation in commerce among the white traders, brought exposure to the distant world of Americans on the east coast. But for the most part these influences were limited, and most of the so-called "mixed-blood" families lived lives dominated, on a day-to-day basis, by the Choctaw world.

In the early nineteenth century the Choctaws sought to appease American demands by ceding sections of land that, at first, seemed of negligible necessity to the Choctaws. However, the demands for land cessions con-

tinued and escalated, until during the mid-1810s, Choctaws leaders saw that they must halt further cessions altogether. Choctaw participation in the world market was limited primarily to trading deer hides in exchange for guns, ammunition, metal tools, and utensils. A few among the Choctaw had begun to sell crops and cattle to nearby Native or white communities, but as their land base shrank from cessions to the United States, so did the game supply within Choctaw territories. The Choctaw economy had incorporated the fur trade and the resulting acquisition of European manufactured goods into the core of Choctaw life. The sudden contraction of this market and the increased difficulty in obtaining European trade goods created a violent disruption and rapid disintegration of Choctaw society. Simultaneously, white traders smuggled enormous quantities of illegal liquor into the Choctaw Nation, promoting its consumption and hence the erosion of Choctaw lifeways. Real deprivation and economic hardship struck with a vengeance, as a whirlwind of change battered the Choctaws from every direction.

In order to understand the enormous psychological impact the Removal Era had on the Choctaws, one must examine the range of relationships between themselves and non-Choctaws. Relations with outsiders were a fundamental facet of Choctaw being. Reciprocity was at the heart of all relations, including those formed by kinship or clan. Relations with outsiders followed the precepts of kinship, and to Choctaws, these relations were not a parody of kinship relations, but were, in fact, actual kinship realized. White Americans and Europeans had long observed these facets of diplomacy and ritual friendship among the Choctaws and other Native peoples. However, they understood only vaguely that these rituals encompassed a fundamental concept central to Native belief systems.

To the Choctaw, fictive kinship relations with outsiders were essential to human coexistence and could not be avoided. The Choctaw Nation defined outsiders as either kin or foe. They believed that everything in life—the physical, mental, abstract, and concrete—was of one functional whole, one system that tied every being together in permanent yet ever dynamic relationships. If all were partners in an interconnected system, one could not act without affecting all others. Therefore, harmonious relationships with animal spirits, inanimate objects, and other human beings were essential. In this worldview, balance and harmony were fundamental to the community's and the individual's existence and well-being. If balance or harmonic relations were disturbed, dire consequences would follow, causing all to suffer.

In their earliest relations with the United States, the Choctaw Nation came from a powerful position. Allied with the Americans during the War of 1812, they provided essential assistance during the Battle of New Orleans, fighting under Andrew Jackson. Subsequently, they assisted Jackson in his assault on the Red Sticks, tipping the balance to the Americans during the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. Intense loyalty and fidelity to one's allies and kin permeated these relations. In the second decade of the nineteenth century, even as the relative balance of power shifted and Choctaws became weaker than the ever-strengthening Americans, the Choctaws believed that their relationship with the Americans would continue unchanged. Since all were part

of a non-hierarchical system in the Choctaw worldview, each group would continue to recognize and act upon the bonds of kinship, even though their relative power or strength might change.

However, the American government conceptualized its relationship with the Choctaw within a hierarchical framework based on relative power. To Americans, it was natural for Choctaws to assume an inferior role. All their dealings with the Choctaws reflect an arrogance founded on their unquestioning belief in their own cultural superiority. Prior to 1800, and perhaps in the first decade of that century, the United States recognized the strength and military prowess of the Choctaws and sought to engage in a diplomatic relationship between equals. In the next two decades, however, Choctaw power declined precipitously, relative to that of the American nation. As a result, Americans began to view their relations with the Choctaws as one of superior to inferior—in both the military and political sense. Having always had a persistent belief in their unquestionable moral and cultural superiority, Americans married the changing relationship of power to their philosophical belief in their inherent superiority, creating a monster that consumed the lands and lives of thousands of Native people without compunction.

The 1820s saw the rise of Andrew Jackson to national prominence. He was extremely popular in the backwoods areas of the American South, where he consistently called for the expulsion of the resident Native nations. The momentum of expansionism escalated exponentially during this decade, as whites poured into the western reaches of the American South hungering for cheap land, and the constituents of American politicians demanded the expulsion, by force if necessary, of the Indians occupying lands they coveted. Whites began invading and squatting on Choctaw soil. The Choctaws thought that surely their "Father" in Washington would evict these interlopers, as promised in the treaties. The reciprocal relationships long recognized between the Choctaws and the American government demanded this much. The Choctaws were confident, because of their traditional expectations of the behavior of allies and friends, that the American government would stem the incursions into their lands, and would guarantee, as promised, their continued sovereignty and territorial integrity. Despite Jackson's long personal history with the Choctaws, however, he now formed the core of those calling for their dispossession and exile. This betrayal was met with disbelief and shock. As a traditional people, the Choctaws found the pace of events and the sudden shift in American policy from assimilation to dispossession incomprehensible. Even the most biculturally adapted Choctaws never believed that betrayal on such a scale actually would occur. The treachery of their old ally, Jackson, and his sponsorship of their expulsion and exile created a tremendous reaction among the Choctaws. But before we explore their reaction to this betrayal, one must examine what dispossession and exile meant to the Choctaw people.

Indian Removal, as the whites termed it, created moral and spiritual crises intimately linked to fundamental Choctaw beliefs about place, origin, and identity. Choctaws had a deep spiritual and physical attachment to the earth. The earth was the source of all power, a "numinous presence of the divine, the sacred, the truly real by reference to which everything else found its orienta-

tion." Most Native people, including Choctaws, vested the earth with an overriding maternal quality: the earth mother gave life and sustained all living things. As siblings, all humans and animals intimately were connected, kindred in a literal sense. All had spirits and destinies irrevocably intertwined with the destiny of humankind.[2]

Many traditional Choctaws believed that humans sprang from the earth from many primeval pairs scattered over the regions of the earth. They were each created separately from the different natural features and substances found in the region of the earth in which each people lived. For example, in a land of forests, the original humans came from the trees; in rugged, mountainous areas, they came from the rocks; on the plains, people emerged from the soil. "Mother earth" gave birth literally as well as spiritually to the Choctaw people.[3]

After their arrival in the American Southeast, sometime back in the ancient mists of time, the Choctaws began to inter their dead in a great mound, built to honor the spirits of the dead. Taking three generations to construct, this sacred mound was called *Nanih Waiya*, known also as *Ishki Chito*, "the Great Mother." This pyramidal mound was located in the southern part of what is now Winston County, Mississippi. Years passed in peace, and then a devastating epidemic struck the people. Everyone died but the headman, who was immortal. When all but this one had perished, the great mound opened and swallowed him.

After the passage of many years, the Great Spirit created four infants, two of each sex, out of the ashes of the dead at the foot of *Nanih Waiya*. They were suckled by a panther, and when they were older and strong enough to leave, the prophet emerged from the Mother and gave them bows, arrows, and an earthen pot. Stretching out his arms, he said, "I give you these hunting grounds for your homes. When you leave them you die." With these words, he stamped his foot; *Nanih Waiya* opened, and, holding his arms above his head, he disappeared forever.[4]

All Choctaw children learned these stories in childhood. They were taught as moral and historical lessons, intertwining the spiritual and literal as did the Choctaws in all areas of their lives. Through the oral traditions, Choctaws learned that they not only were part of the Earth, but also part of a specific region of the earth. The gift of the Great Spirit was *this* land. They were never to leave it, or the nation would die.

The original migration tradition of the Choctaw people emphasizes their attachment to this particular spot of earth (a sacred reciprocal agreement with the dead also is tied to this specific place). This tradition relates how the Choctaw people traveled for forty-three years, everyone carrying the bones of their ancestors. Many of the people carried so many bones that they were unable to carry anything else. Some were so overloaded that they would carry one load forward a half day's journey, deposit it, and then return for the remainder, which they then would carry forward the next day. This task was considered a sacred duty. According to the spiritual teachers, the spirits of the dead "hovered around their bones to see that they were respectfully cared for, and that they would be offended and punished with bad luck, sickness, or even death for indignities, or neglect of their bones."[5]

Each day, at the end of their travels, the people's leader—the *Isht Ahullo*—would plant the Sacred Pole in the ground. At dawn, the leader would rise and see the direction in which the Sacred Pole was leaning—the direction in which the people were to travel that day. One morning at dawn, the leader observed that the Pole "danced and punched itself deeper into the ground; and after some time settled in a perpendicular position, without having nodded or bowed in any direction." The Choctaws' long journey was at last at an end. The Choctaws arrived at the leaning hill—known to the people later as *Nanih Waiya*—in a "plentiful, fruitful land of tall trees and running waters" envisioned by the great Choctaw chiefs in a vision forty-three years before.[6]

At the end of this journey, some of the younger Choctaws did not understand their sacred duty to the dead bones of their deceased kinsmen. The *Isht Ahullo* explained that the people always must take care of "the precious remains of the fathers and mothers," for the Choctaw people were

> charged by the spirits, who are hovering thick around us now, to take care of them; and carry them whithersoever the nation moves. And this we must not, we dare not fail to do. Were we to cast away the bones of our fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, for the wild dogs to gnaw in the wilderness, our hunters could kill no more meat; hunger and disease would follow; then confusion and death would come; and the wild dogs would become fat on the unscaffolded carcasses of this unfeeling nation of forgetful people. The vengeance of the offended spirits would be poured out upon this foolish nation.[7]

In historical times, the Choctaws continued to take their responsibility to the spirits of the dead very seriously. Every time they moved their villages, they transported the remains of those who had died. This duty was considered a sacred pact with the dead. In return for honoring the remains of the dead, living Choctaws would be watched over by the spirits of their ancestors. The spirits spoke to the living through dreams and visions, guiding and assisting the Choctaws in all things.

Traditional Choctaws literally believed that they emerged from the Great Mother Mound. In the mid-nineteenth century, the elderly Choctaws, when asked their place of birth, insisted that they emerged from *Nanih Waiya*. Thus, the forced exile from Mississippi separated the Choctaw people from their own mother. They had been warned by the prophets that the people would all die if they ever left their lands.

The Choctaws tried to convey the imperative reasons that they remain in the lands of their ancestors to the U.S. agents and government. They could not understand the whites' assertion that they took the Choctaws' well-being to heart as they forced them away from that which gave them life. One old man haltingly attempted to impart some understanding of their dilemma to an American agent. He said, "We wish to remain here where we have grown up as the herbs of the woods, and do not wish to be transplanted into another soil." The Choctaws saw themselves as part of the soil, an integral element of the ecosystem, tied inextricably to this specific part of the earth. Their world was a vast, complex system of life and spirits, all comprising an indivisi-

ble whole. Like the old man's herbs, the Choctaws believed they could not be separated from their mother, the land of which they were a part. The Choctaws could no more be separated from these lands and survive than could the pine forests of the Southeast be uprooted and transplanted hundreds of miles to the West. The Choctaws were *part* of their homelands. Separation from it meant their death.[8]

Compounding the enormity of the thought of separation from their homelands was the Choctaw understanding of the west as the direction of death. West, both a direction and a place, held special meaning in Choctaw cosmology. The Choctaw afterworld was located on earth, somewhere in the west. According to Choctaw traditions, the *shilup*, or inside shadow, one of the two spirits that every person has, left the body after death and traveled low over the earth to the west, the Land of Death. Choctaw mortuary rituals had to be performed properly or the *shilup* could not make the journey to the afterworld and instead would hover about the place of death, punishing the living kin who had failed him.

Once the *shilup* arrived in the west, it went to a place of happiness and delight, *shilup i yokni*. However, murderers were excluded from this happy ending. They were unable to find the path leading to the land of happiness and instead remained in view of, but unable to reach, that destination. This place of the murderous spirits was called *atuklant illi*, the Second Death. The horror this place conjured up in the minds of Choctaws cannot be overestimated. It was the land of the living dead, the place where the most horrible spirits roamed in unending despair and hopelessness. It was said that in this place, "the trees are all dead, and the waters are full of toads and lizards, and snakes—where the dead are always hungry, and have nothing to eat—are always sick and never die—where the sun never shines, and where the spirits climb up by the thousands on the sides of a high rock from which they can overlook the beautiful country of the good hunting-grounds … but never can reach it." This was the destination the Americans reserved for the Choctaw people.[9]

To the Choctaw, the west, then, was the Land of the Dead; it was the location of the Second Death, where spirits unable to reach the afterworld roamed forever. The west was the direction from which their ancestors fled in ancient times out of dire necessity. Leaving their homelands in the east meant breaking the covenant with the spirits of the ancestors. In the Choctaw worldview, the act of leaving would mean the nation's death. If they left behind the remains of the dead and abandoned their sacred duty, they would commit the most heinous crime in Choctaw cosmology.

The American arrangements for their physical removal left the Choctaws no choice. They had to abandon the bones of the dead. Under the best of circumstances, there was no way for them physically to disinter all the remains and transport them. In fact, the Choctaws had to abandon most of their material possessions since the United States government provided few conveyances for people, much less baggage. Most necessities remained behind, such as the hominy mortars which the women considered their most essential tool for food preparation.[10]

Abandoning the bones of the dead was unthinkable to most Choctaws. Even the more acculturated Choctaws of mixed Native and white heritage found themselves unable to reconcile themselves to such an act. Many Choctaws, therefore, refused to leave. The Choctaws believed that every human had two souls. The *shilup* left the body and traveled west to the Land of Death. The *shilombish*, however, remained at the site of death guarding the remains of the body and its treatment by living Choctaws.[11] One elderly Choctaw man explained this to the American agents: "In those pines you hear the ghosts of the departed. Their ashes are here, and we have been left to protect them. Our warriors are nearly all gone to the far country west but here are our dead. Shall we go, too, and give their bones to the wolves?"[12] Women especially were reluctant to leave. Many families were split apart, as mothers and grandmothers adamantly refused to abandon the bones of their dead children and their *shilombish*, the outside shadow.[13]

The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was the instrument used by the United States government to force the Choctaws from their homes. Under the guise of legality, this treaty was procured in 1830 by fraud and deception, against the consent of almost the entire Choctaw Nation. Over the subsequent protests of thousands of Native people and white missionaries, the U.S. Senate ratified the treaty, and the government informed the Choctaws that they had three years in which to leave.

This news produced the most profound reactions among the Choctaw. Chaos was the immediate result. The people quit planting crops, many simply gave up. The months of summer passed without a harvest, and when the winter came, the people began to starve. Alcoholic bingeing became the norm, and the children suffered. Drinking led to violence, as hopelessness engulfed the nation. Thirteen Choctaws died from alcohol poisoning in one month. One missionary reported that the entire nation was in utter disarray. The men stopped hunting, the women stopped planting, starvation and disease followed. Children wailed all night from hunger and inattention. Missionary Cyrus Kingsbury reported that the consequences of the treaty "almost beggars description. Loud exclamations are heard against the treaty in almost every part of the nation.… The nation is literally in mourning.… Multitudes are so distressed with their prospects as to sit down in a kind of sullen despair. They know not what to do."[14]

In 1831 the first parties were assembled to leave at certain appointed gathering places throughout the nation. The night before one party departed, the women covered their heads with their skirts, keening the death songs all night long. The warriors sat stoically, facing away from the fires, into the woods. In the morning, as the soldiers stirred the reluctant Choctaws, men and women lovingly touched the leaves and branches of the trees as they departed. They left in autumn, as one of the worst winters in memory struck throughout the South. When they reached the Mississippi River, they were stopped indefinitely by ice floes obstructing passage. The ferries and steamboats stopped running, forcing parties of Choctaws to camp out night after night in freezing rain. The Choctaws seemed unsurprised by the suffering; they were forewarned by the oral prophecies.[15]

The journey to the West was characterized by American ineptitude, incompetence, and fraud. Many Choctaws died or became seriously ill due to exposure, disease, and inhumane arrangements for their journey. Most of the nation was forced to walk the entire journey, which was more than five hundred miles. They traveled in kinship groups. Stories are still related of the suffering and death inflicted on the Choctaw people. One large group of emigrants was lost in a Mississippi swamp. The men, women, children, and elderly walked in chest deep swamp water for thirty miles. They went without food for nearly six days, and many began dying from exposure and starvation. They had given up and were singing their death songs when a rescue party reached them. One witness reported that among the bodies of the dead Choctaws were one hundred horses standing up in the mud, stiff from death. The survivors were so disoriented that their rescuers had to lead them out of the swamp by their hands, like little children.[16]

A Memphis citizen observed a group of exiled Choctaws on the road, completely unprepared for the harsh winter weather. They had no tents—nothing with which to shelter themselves. Not one in ten had even a moccasin on their feet and the great majority of them walked. This same man witnessed the travails of another Choctaw party who camped in the woods near his home. One night a hail storm began, followed by two days of heavy snowfall. The Choctaw party was stranded in the coldest winter weather the region ever had experienced. He reported that they lay in their camp for more than two weeks without shelter of any kind and with very few supplies. The second week, the weather averaged twelve degrees farenheit. The abrupt departure left many with little or no time to prepare or pack necessities, which they were told would be supplied by the United States government. The government failed to do so. Only one blanket was issued per family—and most families averaged six members.

Yet another party traveled through sleet and snow for twenty-four hours, most barefoot and nearly naked, in order to reach Vicksburg without exhausting their inadequate supplies. The disgusted U.S. Army captain who was their official escort, reported that "If I could have done it with propriety I would have given them shoes. I distributed all the tents and this party are entirely without." He complained about the inadequate provisions made for the Choctaws, and said that the sight of these people and their suffering would convince anyone of the need for an additional allowance for transportation.[17]

As if the weather were not enough, the Choctaws were dogged by sickness on their exile west. Cholera, the most dreaded scourge of the times, struck again and again. A report of its presence in Memphis caused all the wagon drivers hired by the U.S. government to abandon their teams, leaving 150 wagons for the sick and aged standing with full teams of horses. Agent William Armstrong reported that these Choctaws had suffered dreadfully from cholera, stating, "The woods are filled with the graves of the victims. . . . Death was hourly among us and road lined with the sick."[18]

The Choctaws were forced to abandon traditional mourning rituals on the journey west. The bodies of the dead were not scaffolded. Typically lasting more than three months, the rituals were viewed as superstitious and hea-

then by the United States agents. The Choctaws sought to take their dead with them to the new lands, but the U.S. agents did not allow them to do so. One group's U.S. agent forced the Choctaws to bury their dead the morning after their death, according to Euramerican tradition. He expressed his satisfaction in his report to his superiors in Washington that the dead had been "decently interred." The Choctaws, of course, understood that the *shilup* of these people were unable to travel to the land of death without the proper ritual of scaffolding and funeral cries. They would be forced to wander the earth, and would punish those who had thus abandoned their sacred duty.[19]

Nearly one-third of the Choctaw Nation died on the march west. Many of these were young children and elderly tribespeople, who disproportionately suffered from exposure, hunger, and disease. The enormous death toll produced social and political chaos. The council of elders that governed each town no longer existed when the Choctaws tried to rebuild in the West. The clans could not survive the death of so many of the elders. The elders were the leaders of each clan—they made the important clan decisions, and all those affecting the smaller kinship units. Since clans traveled together, some suffered death disproportionately, thus upsetting the checks and balances of power so carefully constructed over the centuries by the Choctaw. Their deaths also severely impacted the transmission and survival of cultural knowledge and ritual.[20]

Place always had played an important part in the identity of the Choctaw people. Red and white towns informed the martial or civil responsibilities and emphases of the townsmen. The dispersion of representatives of all clans throughout towns in the nation formed an essential network of unity and cohesiveness, and mitigated conflict among men. The deaths of so many of their people prevented the Choctaws from replicating the physical organization essential to their identity in the new lands of the West. This severe blow to kinship and identity rent the Nation and exacerbated the confusion and depression they suffered after their arrival.[21]

The Choctaws always have been survivors, and have shown themselves adept at meeting the challenges of a changing environment. Within a few years the majority had found kinsmen, erected shelters, and cleared fields. As early as 1833, several hundred Choctaw families had settled on the banks of the Arkansas River, planting crops in anticipation of the arrival later of many more emigrants, for whom they planned to provide corn. Perhaps these folks thought they had escaped the worst, for the spring planting had gone well and most of the people who survived the march were recovering. However, some saw the anger of the spirits raining down on the nation when in June 1833 the Arkansas River overflowed its banks in the greatest flood in its history. In astonishment at the damage done by the raging waters, the United States agent wrote that the Choctaw houses and fields were completely washed away, as though they had never existed. The cattle and horses some Choctaws had managed to bring with them drowned. Incessant rains continued all spring, flooding the entire river network in the new Choctaw Nation. Since the agrarian Choctaws always lived near rivers and streams, many, if not most, were ruined that year. Some families were completely stranded by the high waters, and many began to starve.

Terrible sickness followed the floods. Carcasses of dead animals lined the riverbanks and floated in the waters, making it unfit for human consumption. The U.S. agent wrote that many were starving—"more than they ever suffered before from hunger." He reported many came to him begging for food, having had nothing to eat "for 10, 12, 15 days." The children cried continuously from hunger, and many died. "Within the hearing of a gun from this spot," he wrote, "100 Choctaws had died within the past week."[22] He reported that of the entire number of emigrants, one-fifth died from the floods, disease, and starvation. Many Choctaws were "even reduced to eating the flesh of animals found dead in the woods and on the wayside," reported the agent. He appealed to a nearby army unit for food for the Choctaws. The provisioning officer sent them fifty barrels of bad pork which had putrefied and spoiled. Earlier in the year, the Choctaws had refused to accept his proffer of these provisions, but now, the officer reported to his superior, "he was happy to inform General Gibson that since they were reduced to starvation, they would doubtless be glad to get it."[23]

In fulfillment of the prophecies, the nation was dying. As soon as they departed from their beloved homelands in the east, the Choctaws succumbed to exposure, illness, accidents, depression, misery, and death. No one was left unscathed. Even the U.S. agents were appalled at the suffering of the Choctaw people. The official U.S. government reports indicated that some 20 percent of the Choctaw people had died on the journey, and a great number more—perhaps another 20 percent—died soon after their arrival. The elders died disproportionately, making reestablishment of social and political institutions problematic. Old living patterns, important to the cohesion of the nation, proved impossible to duplicate in the West. Many survivors of the journey did not move from their point of entry into the new lands. According to American observers, they were so depressed, they simply stayed put where they landed and did nothing. Some did not even build shelters or make any effort at all to clear fields or plant crops. Suicide became commonplace, whereas it was almost unknown in prior times.[24]

Word traveled to and from the old nation in the Southeast and the new lands in the years of the Removal. Choctaw families in the West reported the great tragedy befalling the nation. Some of the newly arrived émigrés turned around and started back. Others wrote kin that they should not come west. Those who stayed behind in Mississippi, intending to come later, now decided not to make the journey at all. These people became the prey of invading whites, many of whom were unscrupulous and had no compassion for Native people in distress. The thousands of Choctaws still in Mississippi were forced off their lands and into the remote and worthless swamplands. From there they sometimes would return to look upon their former bountiful homes and farms, all now in the hands of white men.[25]

The new lands of the Choctaws in the West became known among the Choctaw as the Land of Death. The misfortunes continued. On November 13, 1833, the Choctaws experienced a terrible omen. That night, an extraordinary meteor shower lit up the night sky as bright as day "with myriads of meteors darting about in the sky." Some of the women and children screamed and

cried in terror, while others hid. All night long, the showers continued. The terror was not limited to the Choctaws. The Kiowas recorded this event, too, finding it so important that they named the season "the Winter that the Stars Fell." The Choctaws knew that the Great Spirit spoke through natural events such as this and that the unnatural event portended great misfortune. This celestial event coincided with the U.S. announcement that no more provisions would be provided for the people. The period covered by the Treaty for their emigration had expired. And despite the terrible floods and illness and death suffered in the past two years, the United States intended to do nothing more to assist the exiles.[26]

The suffering of the Choctaw people intensified with the horror of a smallpox pandemic that struck Native people throughout the West from 1836 to 1840. More than 10,000 Native people died in the northern plains alone. Newly arrived emigrants in the Choctaw Nation brought the disease with them. More than 1,000 Choctaws died, including their renowned and beloved leader, Mingo Mushulatubbee. Some families were destroyed completely, all members succumbing within days of each other. Whooping cough decimated the population of babies and toddlers among the Choctaws. One observer reported that all of the small children for miles were killed by one whooping cough epidemic in the nations.[27]

As the decade of the 1840s began, the Choctaw people struggled to survive and rebuild in their new lands. The nation had been decimated by Indian Removal. Some estimate that more than one-third of the nation died as a result of their forced exile west and as many as 4,000 Choctaws remained behind in the Southeast, to be dispossessed from their homes and relegated to wandering in the swamplands, working occasionally as stoop laborers on lands that had been their own. The social and political organization of the nation was in shambles. The clans so central to Choctaw identity and community barely survived the exile. Despite the terrors of the 1830s, however, the nation refused to die. The Choctaws began to rebuild, and in an uneven fashion social and political institutions began once again to function.

The story of the American policy of Indian Removal must be reexamined and retold. It was not merely an official, dry, legal instrument as it often is portrayed. Removal, as experienced by Native people, was an official U.S. policy of death and destruction that created untold human pain and misery. It was unjust, inhuman, and a product of the worst impulses of Western society. Indian Removal cannot be separated from the human suffering it evoked—from the toll on the human spirit of the Native people. It cannot be remembered by Americans as merely an official U.S. policy, but must be understood in terms of the human suffering it caused, and the thousands of deaths and lives it destroyed.

NOTES

1. For Indian Removal, see Arthur H. DeRosier, Jr., *The Removal of the Choctaw Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970); Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians* (Norman: University of

Oklahoma Press, 1932); Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991). For an eyewitness account of the departing Choctaws, see Horatio B. Cushman, ed., *History of the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Natchez Indians* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 114–16.

2. Cushman, ed., *History*, 94–5; and Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 19.

3. John R. Swanton, *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1931, repr., Birmingham, Alabama: Birmingham Public Library Press, 1993), 202.

4. J. F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State with Biographical Notes of Eminent Citizens* (Jackson, MS: Power and Barksdale; repr., Louisiana State University, 1964), 518–19.

5. Swanton, 13–14.

6. Charley Jones, Address to Choctaws, Choctaw Labor Day Festival, September, 1997; and Annie Haley, Discussion, September, 1991. Notes in possession of author.

7. Cushman, 15.

8. Claiborne, 512; Mingo Pushmataha, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs,* II, (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1832–1861), 230; and Simpson Tubby, qtd. in Swanton, 100.

9. George Catlin, *North American Indians*, ed. Peter Matthiessen (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 404; *The Missionary Herald*, vol. xxiv, no. 6, 182–183; and Ruth Fowler Dodd, Interview August 1992. Notes in possession of author.

10. Jesse O. McKee and Jon Al Schlenker, *The Choctaws: Cultural Evolution of a Native American Tribe* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1980), 19; and Grant Foreman *Indian Removal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), 79.

11. Swanton, 216–17; and *The Missionary Herald*, 182–83.

12. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province*, 512–14.

13. John Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, June 13, 1834, Box 1, Number 41, Peter P. Pitchlynn Collection, University of Oklahoma.

14. Cyrus Kingsbury to Jeremiah Evarts, October 16, 1830, File 6, Number 24, Cyrus Kingsbury Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

15. Cyrus Kingsbury to Jeremiah Evarts, October 16, 1830, File 6, Number 22, Cyrus Kingsbury Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma; Greenfield Leflore to Eaton, November 19, 1830, Office of Indian Affairs, "1830 Choctaw Emigration," in *Indian Removal,* ed. Grant Foreman, 39; Colquhoun to Gibson, July 1, 1832, Senate Document 412, I, 619; Annie Herchel Hanie, Interview, May 1987.

16. Senate Document 512, I, 719; Harriet B. Wright to David Greene, "Missionary Letters," Andover-Harvard Theological Library, LXXII, no. 138, 1832.

17. Foreman, 53, 60.

18. Langham to Commissary General of Subsistence, November 8, 1832, Office of Indian Affairs, "Choctaw Emigration," 387, 737.

19. Letter from George S. Gaines, *Mobile Commercial Register*, November 12, 1831, 1.

20. Cushman, 95, 148, 176.

21. John Edwards, "The Choctaw Indians in the Middle of the 19th Century," in

Chronicles of Oklahoma, ed. John R. Swanton (Oklahoma: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1932), 10, 395, 400, 401.

22. Armstrong to Herring, September 17, 1833, Office of Indian Affairs, "Choctaw Agency," quoted in Foreman, *Indian Removal,* 97.

23. U.S. Senate Document 512, Twenty-third Congress, first session, "Indian Removal," I, 324.

24. William H. Goode, *Outposts of Zion, With Limnings of Mission Life* (Cincinnati: Poe and Hitchcock, 1863), 53; *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1833*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1833), 254; and Annie Haney, Personal communication, August 1991. Notes in possession of author.

25. John Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, November 23, 1832, Box 1, File 31; John Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, February 21, 1833, Box 1, File 35; John Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, January 30, 1834, Box 1, File 40; John Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, June 13, 1834, Box 1, File 41; and John Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, September 30, 1834, Box 1, File 43, Peter P. Pitchlynn Collection, University of Oklahoma.

26. James Mooney, *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 260–61; Cushman, 195–97; and John Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, October 7, 1834, Box 1, File 44, Peter P. Pitchlynn Collection, University of Oklahoma.

27. Lavinia Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, December 14, 1841, Box 1, File 72; Rhoda Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, December 29, 1841, Box 1, File 73; Rhoda Pitchlynn to Peter P. Pitchlynn, January 5, 1842, Box 1, File 74, and January 15, 1842, Box 1, File 75, Peter P. Pitchlynn Collection, University of Oklahoma; and Cyrus Kingsbury to Jeremiah Evarts, November 24, 1830, Cyrus Kingsbury Collection, University of Oklahoma.