

Samuel Cloud on the Trail of Tears (1838)

This story of Samuel Cloud, who turned nine on the Trail of Tears, was retold by his great great grandson. As you read the account, compare this experience with the sanguine picture of Indian removal that President Andrew Jackson presented to Congress in his second annual message.

It is Spring. 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 home and begin knocking over pottery and looking into everything. My mother and I are taken by several men to where their horses are and are held there at gun point. 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.

We walk a long ways. My mother does not let me get far from her. My father is walking by the other men, talking in low, angry tones. The soldiers look weary, as though they'd rather be anywhere else but here.

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 see other members of my clan. We children try to play, but the elders around us are anxious and we do not know what to think. I often sit and watch the others around me. I observe the guards. 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. He talks with the other men, but no one seems to know what to do or what is going to happen. 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. I don't know what any of this means. It seems like yesterday, I was playing with my friends.

It is now Fall. It seems like forever since I was clean. 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. We walk. My mother keeps me close to her. I am allowed to walk with my uncle or an aunt, occasionally.

We walk across the frozen earth. Nothing seems right anymore. The cold seeps through my clothes. I wish I had my blanket. I remember last winter I had a blanket, when I was warm. I don't feel like I'll ever be warm again. I remember my father's smile. It seems like so long ago.

We walked for many days. I don't know how long it has been since we left our home, but the mountains are behind us. Each day, we start walking a little later. They bury the dead in shallow graves, because the ground is frozen. 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.

We come to a big river, bigger than I have ever seen before. It is flowing with ice. The soldiers are not happy. We set up camp and wait. We are all cold and the snow and ice seem to hound us, claiming our people one by one. North is the color of blue, defeat and trouble. From there a chill wind blows for us as we wait by a frozen river. We wait to die.

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 don't want to leave her alone. 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. She coughs and it wracks her whole body. 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 hot and coughing worse than usual. When I woke up, she was cold. I tried to wake her up, but she lay there. The soft warmth she once was, she is no more. I kept touching her, as hot tears stream down my face. She couldn't leave me. She wouldn't leave me.

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. My clan will take care of me, but 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 tread softly by my uncle, my hand in his. 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 roads in their woolen clothes that kept them warm, watching us pass. None of those white people are here to say they are sorry that I am alone. None of them care about me or my people. All they ever saw was the color of our skin. All I see is the color of theirs and I hate them.