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| The Trail and It’s Influence |
| A Look into The Trail of Death’s Impact |
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“Trail of Death”: A Personal Reflection

Oh, the woes of that terrible day still flash through my mind, like lightning scars a tree for all its years to come. There had been numerous talks and conferences between the Americans and our chiefs attempting to convince us that moving from our current lands to the west was both necessary and beneficial, but they had not ended in agreement. Even our ever-present Catholic priest, Benjamin Petit was opposed to the idea and feared its effects on our people. However, nothing could prepare us for the arrival of General Tipton’s men and their intents on the morning of September 4, 1838.

The order and procession of each day was grueling, tiresome, and deadly for many. I recall the US flag being drug continuously through the sky ahead of me, always carried in front of the lengthy procession. Then baggage carts then followed, next the carriage used by the chiefs, then a lengthy section of us on horseback. Behind us the sick would lay in wagons meant to protect them from the elements but more likely suffocating them instead. (Petit, pg99). It seemed that at every camp, more and more graves were dug and filled with my brethren, being the true cost of this forced journey. We set out with approximately 800 strong, and barely arrived a month’s journey later with 650.

Even the Lord himself was often ignored, though we were sometimes granted two hours on Sunday morning for “devotional exercises” (Petit, pg101). Speaking of the Lord and Christianity, the missionary and conversion attempts during this ordeal were simply astounding. Not only did we have a Catholic priest traveling with us, leading us through daily trials and assisting those feeling in need, but we saw more and more religious groups on the way. Near the Missouri boundary, the “Society of Jesus” came out and met our journeying group, announcing his intentions to leave the Kickapoo area and “establish himself among … Christians…” (Petit, pg105).

I remember that first day of the march, the day General Tipton arrived and began enrolling my friends and family in the impending march: set to begin September 4 despite our priests’ courageous yet scathing disapproval. On the morning of the 4th, our camp was virtually leveled and the march itself began whether we had accepted it yet or not. Any rebellious chiefs were hidden away in a ‘carriage’ at the front of the procession, yet it seemed more like a prison or cage to me. I suspect only about 150 or so of my people still managed to remain in Indiana after the march began, as opposed to the 800 or so of us that were caught in the unavoidable wave of force (Petit, 89). The march, especially at the beginning, was not kind to those being forced to take part. I felt as if the Americans always held a bayonetted gun to my back if I showed the slightest signs of hesitation to obedience. However, the marches themselves seemed to be determined, at least in distance, by the availability of water and other necessary supplies for self-preservation. That, at least, I can be thankful for. I feel as though our priest, Benjamin Petit, sees only the bad things coming from this march. He sees the lost and confused souls, the sick laying in wagons, and the scarcity of kindness spreading throughout the group as a whole. I almost feel sorry for his slight misinterpretation here. However, his encouragement and growth of the Catholic doctrine without our ranks is encouraging, to him at least. On September 9, Petit officiated a camp remarked upon by General Tipton as a place where Petit “had produced a very favorable change I the morals and industry of the Indians…” (Petit, 92).

About halfway through the first march, circa September 18 on this year 1838, I estimate approximately 67 of my tribe sick, with 8 to 10 appearing deathly ill (Petit, 95). However, by the evening of the following day I heard that 17 of my brethren had died already since we had departed almost 3 weeks prior. We finally arrived two months after our departure on the western side of the Mississippi and Quincy, on the Osage River; on November 4. (Petit, 95).

While we ended up losing many of our closest friends and allies during this ordeal, it was not necessarily as harsh and rough as many people would have you believe. We were allowed hunting along the journey, when time and safety permitted. We also were given watch and necessities when required and water itself seems to have dictated out journey more than anything else. Benjamin Petit also performed an exemplary job in keeping the faith strong and alive throughout us during this journey. He openly expressed his concerns before the event took place, yet stood by our side for better or worse after a decision had been made. He paid the ultimate price and ended up dying of sickness, though he stayed with us until well after our arrival and continued to spread the word of Catholicism and the Lord throughout us; showing true inspiration and determination to further us as people no matter the cost to him. He refused to let “them [us] disperse and perish by the abandonment of that Christianity fully developed which Providence sends today into the midst of the nearby Indians…” (Petit, 95). He even managed to convince the Americans that our chiefs should not be locked up in some carriage box, but instead be allowed to take their part and roles with the people (us) directly (Petit, 99).

It was a long, arduous journey with many losses, but we survived as a people and are still alive and well. Just one more stepping stone in our storied past that makes us a part of who we are.

Works Cited

Petit, Benjamin Marie. 1941 [1836–38]. The Trail of Death: Letters of Benjamin Marie

Petit, edited by Irving McKee, 11–28, 73–116. Indiana State Historical Publications 14 (1).