TRAIL OF TEARS

A 1,300-mile Journey to Retrace the Steps of the Cherokee

The expedition would follow the Indian removals of the early 1800s, specifically the removal of the Cherokee from their ancestral homelands in the Great Smokey Mountains to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the modern-day capital of the Cherokee Nation. During this turbulent period, tens of thousands were displaced and forced to relocate, most of the time aggressively and against their will. The then president, Andrew Jackson, signed into law the Indian Removal Act on May 28th, 1830. This act, strongly enforced at the time, forced the five civilised eastern tribes (Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole, and Chickasaw) to territory west of the Mississippi River, allowing white settlement on ancestral lands. The act was strongly supported by the southern and north-eastern populations, but strongly opposed by all tribes – including the Cherokee who worked tirelessly to stop the relocation. The US government eventually forced them on foot and by water 800 -1000 miles into Indian Territory, now modern-day Oklahoma. This has long been seen as systematic genocide and discrimination against an ethnic group, leading to horrific deaths. It's estimated that of the 16,000 that were removed, as many as 8,000 Cherokee died from hunger, exposure, and disease. This journey was known amongst the Cherokee as 'Nunahi-Duna-Dlo-Hilu-I' – 'The Trail Where They Cried'.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: IAN FINCH // JAMIE BARNES // WILL SAUNDERS
LOCATION: USA

PART ONE

Smokey Mountains

'Three weeks pass by, and my two brothers and three sisters all get sick and die, one each day and all are gone. We bury them by the trail and go on. Lots of others die every day and so we go on. We bury and march.'

—Unidentified Cherokee survivor, 1929

'Smokey Mountains' is derived from the Cherokee Word *shaconage* (sha-kon-oh-hay), which means 'Land of the Blue Smoke'. At this time of year, in mid-March, the bare oak and cove wood trees still form an almost impenetrable brush over the rugged eastern contours. The spine of the Great Smokey Mountains stretches north-east to south-west over North Carolina and Georgia. In the valleys, small creeks born somewhere amongst the summits feed huge arterial rivers. It was here, in this vast and beautiful landscape, that the Cherokee lived for thousands of years. Later, it was the place they were forced to leave.

Our aim was to cross the 50 miles from Elkmount to Tapoco on foot, following the spine of this great range and using the sun as a compass. This would feed us into the Little Tennessee River and onto the wider and longer Tennessee River, the only water source running south to north in the US. On a deeper, storytelling level we wanted to begin in the north-west and experience the region from a perspective of immersion. This was our chance to see, even in a modern world, a place that has remained largely unchanged thousands of years.

MARCH 16TH, 2019; 08.30

The skies were clear and it was bitterly cold. Flat wispy clouds stretched from the horizon to what seemed like the edge of the world. To access higher elevations, Jamie and I planned to start on smaller trails accessed from a campground in the fertile valley. From maps and GPS we identified lesser-known trails that weave and tumble over raging creaks, forested plateaus, and across bridges spun from fallen trees. A dizzying array of switchbacks ascend onto immense, forested ridgelines. Black bear and white-tailed deer roam the steep hillsides. On the ground was everything we needed for five or six winter days in the mountains and for seven weeks on the river. Our wooden beaver-tail canoe paddles, to be used when we reached the Tennessee River, were double-strapped vertically to the outside of our 25kg expedition packs. As we moved off, I looked down at my weathered boots – I always make a point of visually recording my first step. I was keen to slow down, look more, and detach from the rhythm and rush of city life. A gradual immersion into the landscape nurtured and cherished by the Cherokee was our raison d'être.

As the sun cautiously slipped below the horizon on our first day, we finally ascended the last of the trail switchbacks. From here the route turned south-west, following a sweeping ridgeline for further than we could see. Trees stood like infinite needles either side of the narrow trail; frozen icicles hung on outcrops and sprouted like miniature towers from the soil. Sores on my feet began to swell and tear. That night we took comfort in our cold tents under pine and cove wood. Above us, hanging on metal cables, were brightly coloured food bags and rucksacks – defence for early season bears seeking midnight feasts of the non-human variety. We

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Photos: Will Saunders

Photos: Will Saunders

planned on a fire each night, not only to provide warmth, but as a point of community. It was also a chance to hone skills needed for the long, wet stretches we envisaged along the Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers. That evening, the fire smouldered generosity that fended off the bitterness of night. It was possible we'd meet lonely hikers in the remoter stretches of the mountains and smaller groups in the shelters scattered on the ridgelines. We hoped a fire might invite others to come and share their stories. Paddles strapped to rucksacks might entice conversation, especially this far from a river.

A bitter morning gave way to a warm afternoon and the Smokey Mountains continued to be magical and mysterious. Trees gave way to wide-open clearings where mist hovered ghostlike against the low ground. It felt like a spiritually rich place, rightly revered as sacred for all time. In the quiet moments, as summit winds turned up my collar, I liked to imagine that some of the overlooks remained unchanged since the day of the Cherokee. Did they stop and look as I now did, pausing in awe for a moment before moving on with their hunt or search for water? From talking to local people, each of the clearings (known as balds) still retains a specific story that links the landscape to the Cherokee. These are the stories that would wrap my imagination and which I would later go in search of.

Three days and 30 miles in, high ridgelines gave way to rolling summits and sylvan, stream-fed valleys. Although I couldn't see her snaking turns, I sensed with relief that the Little Tennessee River was within reach. Those last few days, the frigid weather, desperately heavy packs, and unremitting ascent and descent had slowly denuded our reserves; we felt bleak and empty despite the depth of beauty around us. Our bodies craved energy. Immediately after eating, we were hungry again. We scraped dehydrated food packs clean before painfully hoisting rucksacks from tree stump to shoulder. At times like those, when food was even partially rationed, we felt something of the unfamiliar sensation of what it must be like to be desperately hungry.

I first laid eyes on the Little Tennessee River around noon on day five. We'd descended more than 1,000m in one long morning. After nearly a week on foot over the high Smokies, each step was painful even with extended trekking poles. We emerged at a dirt track beside the Little Tennessee River, not far from a white ranger building and a main road beyond it. Sports cars and motorcycles sped loudly along it. Through the trees the river sparkled emerald green. We sheltered from the sun at the ranger station, adjusting kit and changing footwear. On the opposite bank, high forested bluffs and low hills began at the water's edge and ascended steeply, creating a deep, glacial valley. Above a dammed lake, osprey cavorted in thermals. The bitterness of early spring had given way to warm sun. The change from rocky mountain trails to hard tarmac stung our feet and we hobbled along the stony verge beside the road. When we reached the century-old Cheoah Dam some hours later, with faces pushed up against a chain fence, we watched tens of thousands of gallons of water thunder every second into the valley below. Whitewater boiled and spiralled under concrete pillars, ripping along the shores tearing low-hanging branches from trees. How drastically had the dam altered the river ecosystem since 1916, I wondered? Even subtle changes to a river can adversely affect aquatic life. Our need for energy from hydroelectric power has permanently changed an environment that the Cherokee respected and lived comfortably with. This dam seemed a metaphor for our journey. Fitting then we should begin the next phase here.

As I looked down, I couldn't deny that I was in awe. I was also nervous. Over the last month this region had experienced the worst weather for 30 years, in some places raising river levels by 10m. We had escaped most of it, but the wet weather had turned rivers into capricious and turbulent unknowns, ripping houses from their footings and dragging them into the brush. My thoughts drifted to the next day, when we would have to negotiate this tyrant by canoe, possibly for 1,500km.

PART TWO

Where Rivers Collide

'The final detachment of Cherokee left east on December 5th, travelling by boat. The winter was unusually cold. Overland groups that had left earlier were now stretched out across Kentucky. When the Mississippi River clogged with ice, groups began to pile up on each other. Thousands huddled in bitter cold along the banks of the river, unable to cross until the ice broke up.'

—Cherokee Heritage Centre, Tahlequah, Oklahoma

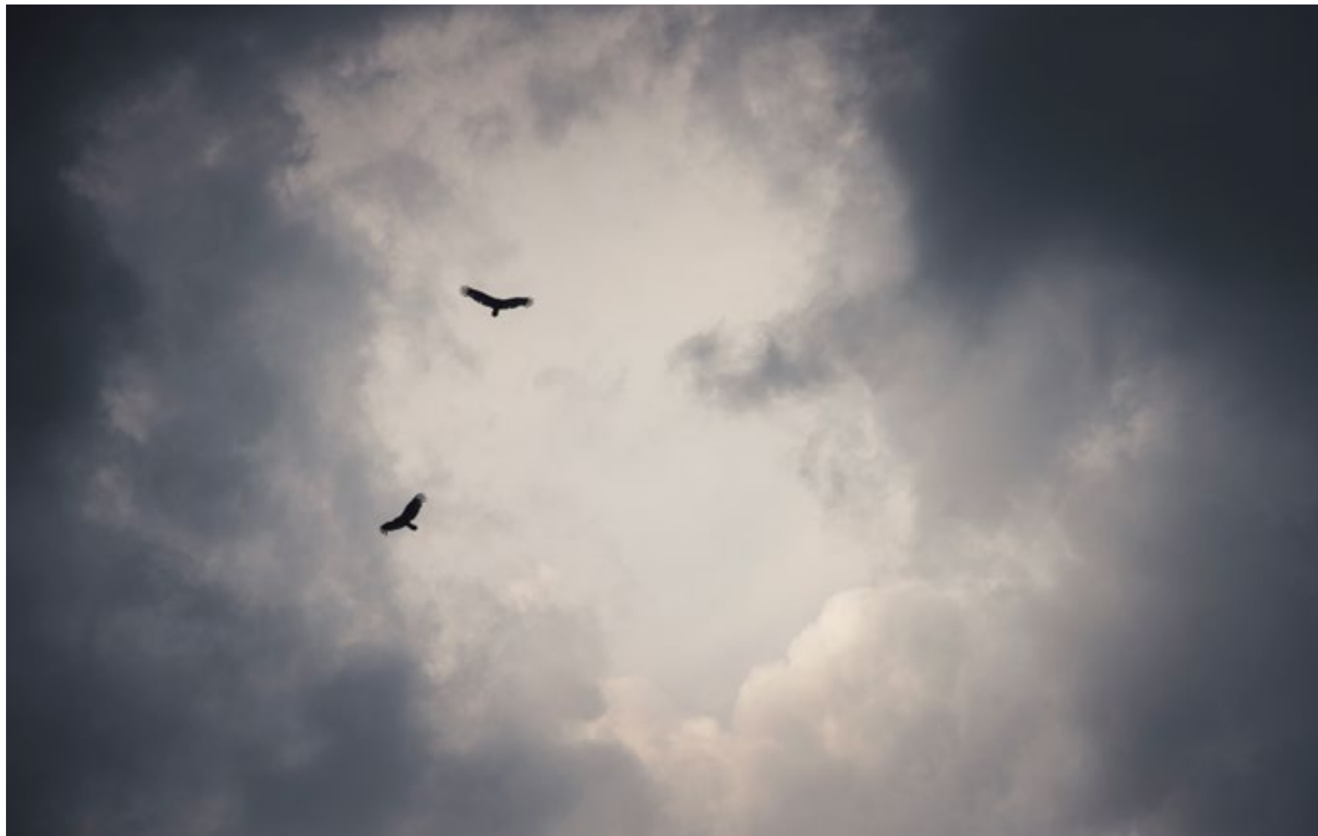
APRIL 26TH, 2019; 11.00

We had been given warning after warning about the dangerous flow state of the Mississippi. Its waters were unseasonably high after record rainfall and snowmelt. Thick trunks of oak and maple had careened like trains off their rails in the muddy currents. Immense barges used the river as a superhighway, moving coal, concrete, and grain to the Gulf of Mexico and the headwaters of the Ohio River. The wake from their huge propellers could topple boats and crush lonely canoes.

One month and 700 miles earlier, we'd put in at the headwaters of the Little Tennessee River at the base of the Smokey Mountains. It was here in 1838 that over 2,800 Cherokee were forcibly removed from their Tennessee Valley homelands as part of the Indian Removals instigated by Andrew Jackson. As one of the five civilised tribes, the Cherokee were moved by steamboat over 900 miles up the Tennessee River, down the Mississippi to Memphis, and onwards to the mouth of the Arkansas River. From there they were taken further upstream into Tahlequah, the modern-day capital of the Cherokee Nation. Steamers pulled flat wooden boats loaded with entire families. Heavy rain drenched them and bitter winds whipped off the river water. All they had to eat was cornmeal, flour, and bacon grease. Following this exact route had taken us a month of paddling to be within reach of the infamous harbour at Cairo, Kentucky, where the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers converge. High wind forced us to seek shelter within a dense copse of oak a few miles from Cairo. From downriver came the hum of road traffic crossing a half-moon bridge of rusted blue iron. To the west, across the river, white barges sat motionless awaiting cargo, captains, and orders. Charcoal clouds hung low and frothed, heavy with storms. We had a decision to make: stay there and let the storms pass, hunkering down overnight, or paddle hard for 12km through God knew what kind of conditions to our intended stop off at Wickliffe, Kentucky. The lure of shelter, coffee, and warmth was almost as strong as the wind that would inevitably try to stop us. We had made good time, but this place was not ideal. Hugging the treeline had been our go-to in poor weather, but it offered only scant protection. We decided we would chance it and go.

Within minutes we were weaving a path amid the flooded treeline, working our way down towards the iron bridge. Paddles paused as we watched the beautifully hypnotic architecture of the iron structure pass overhead. I was momentarily envious of people, comfortable and warm

Photos: Will Saunders



Photos: Ian Finch

Photo: Jamie Barnes

in their cars sipping hot coffee. As we worked the calmer eastern currents on our way downriver, to the west the storm grew ominous. Broader, darker, and more intense with every minute. Behind us, the bridge slipped from view into a forbidding wall of heavy grey. From long experience, we knew: it was about to hit and hit hard.

We had continued to hug the shoreline as the angular storm gathered fury and speed. Static shipping containers used by the barges for delivering cargo sat along the flooded banks, side by side like parked cars. We paddled the slower water between the rusted containers and the lush green riverbank, where eddies sometimes formed, giving us time to survey the weather, eat, and rest. On occasion, the current picked up and slid under the barges, bringing an uprush of waves. There was no rhyme or reason to them, or where they would occur. Nothing here had any consistency.

As the storm approached and opened up, the light dimmed. Orange faded to grey and then to black. Rain fell in waves, devilish. Wind clawed. The storm took on an unimaginable ferocity. Shielding ourselves, we stayed behind the barges and slowly picked our way downriver until we found what I thought was an eddy. We stopped to rest and watch for a while. Above roiled a hypnotic V-shape of foaming cloud, its apex reaching beyond the horizon. In the rain Jamie unclipped his DSLR camera and began altering the settings to capture the dizzying array of natural forces surrounding us. It was then I noticed our sideways sliding. We weren't in a static eddy at all, but what was now clearly a violent, sweeping current. The canoe began rotating, surging suddenly in the direction of one of three immense floating containers. One rusted angular corner bore down on us like a spear set to carve into us, crushing and rotating us into its underbelly and undeniably drowning us both. Seconds stood between us and a watery grave.

Instinct drove me. I shouted directions to Jamie through the driving rain. He dropped his camera and paddled furiously. I'd turned the canoe to angle it away from the approaching containers. We powered into forward motion, looking to be away and around them, but every second seemingly dragged us closer. Paddles were a blur. Words and actions bled into each other, something primal and animal-like seizing control. I shouted commands aiming for the safest edge of the container. I put the canoe into a hard left turn away from the savage current sliding under the barge. The canoe was caught and brutally propelled away and parallel to the containers' longest sides. Something deep and resonant echoed above the storm. I looked up, fearful, and saw the gaping bow of a huge barge, engines moaning against the strong current and wind, heading towards us. The situation could not have been more dire.

Despite our paddling, something hard took hold of us and propelled us through the tiniest gap between the oncoming barge and the nearest container, like water shot through a narrow canal. We worked and struggled, and in minutes we'd pulled the canoe left into a small, secluded cove behind a grass island and in front of a barge repair building. Torrential rain now filled the canoe, but I didn't care. I was shaking. I studied my calloused hands while Jamie sat very still, head down, rain running off his hair in long threads. Adrenaline silenced us until, as I laid my paddle across my lap, I said: 'Do you know how close we were to drowning there?' All I got in reply was a nervous laugh and muffled expletives.

That night I didn't sleep. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw red. Or was it purple? I saw the barge and the violent sideways shift of water sliding under its bow. I saw snapshots and couldn't help but evaluate my decisions. People told me after the event that large boats and even whole barges had been crushed in front-end vortices just like that one. Later, surveying detailed maps, we would realise the flooded Mississippi and Ohio rivers converged on exactly that point; at the start of a wide, sweeping turn, a river's fastest and most powerful point. The fact that the Mississippi had been flooded had nearly doubled the speed of its already savage current.

One week later, at the start of May, we grounded the canoe for the final time in Memphis, Tennessee. We'd paddled 1,500km of swollen rivers and completed a large portion of the original waterborne route the Cherokee took during removals. We took stock there and absorbed the lessons we had been taught. The Cherokee's fight for survival during this catastrophic time in their history had taken place on the same turbulent waters we had just travelled. Their tenacity and resistance suffused the landscape, in trees' boughs and wind's roar. Their energy resonated in the flow of the water, their stories told by the curves of the landscape. Our own challenges paled by comparison. Yet each day we drew something from their collective strength.

PART THREE

Together We Walk

'...the people are very loathe to go on, and unusually slow in preparing for starting each morning. I am not surprised at this because they are moving not from choice to an unknown region not desired by them. I am disposed to make full allowance for their unhappy movement.'

—Elijah Hicks, reporting on his detachment, October 24th

MAY 2019

On October 11th, 1838, the Bell Detachment of some 700 Cherokee men, women, and children began the journey west from Memphis to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma. These Cherokee were blood related and some were even wealthy. They had travelled vast distances on foot from Charleston, Georgia, through Chattanooga, across the Tennessee River, eventually arriving at Memphis on the banks of the Mississippi River. From here they opted for a more direct route to Indian Territory than that of the other removal detachments. Travelling through Arkansas was tough. They followed what rudimentary roads existed through rugged terrain, carrying or sometimes purchasing provisions for the journey. Of the 17 detachments that led the Cherokee, most were shadowed by military escort and forced to walk for long periods. The route is named after the Cherokee official who led them: John Bell.

Leaving Memphis our aim was to handrail the Bell route, using a slightly more northerly passage. Our hope was that this would ensure our connection to the vast greenery of Arkansas and we'd avoid some of the dangerous highways and roads that now mirror the original removal route. Before leaving, we were as ruthless as we could be with our copious kit: the smallest items and luxuries were left behind; only essentials came with us. What remained was a rucksack almost as heavy as the day we began the expedition and our hearts sank at the thought of the suffering to come. 30°C heat soon ground our progress to a painful shuffle.

The expedition had a time window based on visa requirements and weather patterns. We knew we had a few days' leeway but nothing more. We also knew it was going to be humid and desperately hot. After 42 days paddling, our feet weren't prepared. Long days in the canoe with wet feet had softened the skin. We'd hardly walked in six weeks, and our posture and gait had changed to hunch and hobble – punishment for sitting for so long. We had planned on 25-30km each day. With the weight of the rucksacks and wrapped in such intense early summer heat, we were barely making 15 or 20. Each morning we woke and ate earlier, hoping the additional time would bring us extra distance at the end of the day. In fact, the more time on the road we spent, the worse it was. Each morning we'd pull socks over seeping blisters; each evening, we'd re-dress the places where the skin had ripped and formed another sensitive area. Something had to change.

One evening after a particularly savage thunderstorm had halted our progress, we were taken in by an Arkansan man and his wife. Barry was a local electrician working on state electricity lines. A tall, burly man with a strong accent, he'd seen Jamie and me that morning; and, on the way home, when he saw us again, he felt compelled to enquire and ultimately offer help. Outside of the

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Photos: Ian Finch

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small town of McCrory, a violent weather pattern was rolling in from the south-east. As the storm began to gather in the humid evening, he'd pulled over and offered us shelter in an empty house he was due to renovate that summer. It didn't take much persuasion. The house sat on the outside of town and, although there was no furniture or running water, a yellow bucket of fresh water sat in the shower. This was enough for us to wash hands, faces, and flush the toilet. As we lay in the darkness of the main room, we felt secure and dry. The storm outside lashed at the house and the adjoining garage. I peered through wooden slats at horizontal rain that swept past in intense waves. The teal colour of the porch light made every drop gleam as it swamped the driveway.

The following morning, as the rain began to ease, we contemplated the painful day ahead. The Jetboil bubbled in the centre of the room. A car crunched on the gravel outside and I admit we were drawn to the sound. We opened the front door to see Barry standing with what looked like a blue foldable cart with four wheels. We examined it quizzically. He offered it to us to transport our equipment and we looked at each other and smiled. Could we actually use this? What seemed at first like a curious idea soon became a decision that would change the outcome of the expedition altogether. Jamie had suffered the most with his feet. That morning the pain was palpably unbearable. I hated to watch him wince as he dressed and re-dressed the gaping holes under his toes. Struggling with my own pain threshold, we decided to put Jamie's belongings in the cart and I would continue as normal, carrying my pack. Jamie strapped a belt to the handle of the cart and re-tied it to his waist, using the cart's steering as a pulley. Much like the pulks in polar journeys, the cart was pulled from the front. Eventually, we closed the door of the empty house and made our way on wet tarmac. Trucks and lorries had begun their daily commute with groceries and farming equipment. But as Jamie made his way out onto the tarmac, I knew this was going to change the game. Still limping, yes, but now he moved more swiftly and easily. We weren't confined by the size of our packs but by the volume of the cart. We could pull more food, carry more water, and rediscover morale we believed we had left behind us hundreds of kilometres earlier. It seemed that, for Jamie, pushing forward became a relief, rather than painful chore, even if we did both appear homeless. We didn't know it then, but southern hospitality was about to take another turn.

In the early evening, a car stopped a little way in front of me. My experience of this kind of thing was that it would be someone stopping to enquire what on earth we were doing, or to offer us food. But the driver's door took some time to open. I swung my rucksack off my shoulder and put it down. I tried to make out the signature of the driver through the reflection in the windscreen. A woman stepped out with a wide smile, waving. Lauren had been on the way to work the day before and had seen us – it was she who had suggested the cart to Barry. She eagerly went to the rear of her car and lifted the trunk, pulling out a second cart, identical to the first. Stunned, I wasn't sure what to say. Gratitude didn't seem enough. I devised my own hauling system from straps that had once held my sleeping mat. Lauren watched as I lifted the rucksack and all of my equipment into the cart. It was a mess and needed some work, but we were both far more mobile on four wheels.

Carts, new inner soles, new running shoes, and the chance to really take care of our feet saw us double our speed. All that remained was to tiptoe through Arkansas's infamous storm and tornado season. From there we would ascend into the back roads of the Ozark Mountains and up into Tornado Alley in Oklahoma. Up until now we had been lucky. Tornadoes had ripped through counties only a few miles from where we walked. People had died. In some cases, we would have to divert as trees lay displaced and shattered across roads. When bad weather rolled in our plan would be to hunker down wherever we could, be it shop doorways, treelines, or in the

comfort of a local church. Some days it worked beautifully, some days in didn't. Yet, during these times, locals would appear as if by magic, offering us a place to stay, water, and a bed with pillows. It was here, day after day, we would form friendships and tell stories that seemed to last forever.

JUNE 3RD, 2019; 16.00

Nine kilometres left. But these were no ordinary nine kilometres. We both looked lovingly at our carts, knowing this was goodbye. I'd thought leaving behind *Sequoyah*, our canoe, had been hard. The wheels were at breaking point, the rubber was stripped, tarmac stones were wedged inside the rims. The frames were visibly cracking under the weight of all the water and Snickers bars we had elected to bring. The carts had been with us for nearly 600km. They were part of us now. But I doubted the wheels would make another 10.

As we unpacked the carts outside a roadside store, a white flatbed turned in to the parking lot. Two young Cherokee men got out and walked over to where we were. We shook hands and introduced ourselves. Parker was tall and dressed in T-shirt and shorts, while Wrighter was shorter and more athletic, with a long ponytail. Both were, to me, quintessentially Cherokee. We had planned to meet them here. To finish the expedition, we wanted to make the final push alongside two Cherokee – a youth and an elder. Before the expedition began, I'd contacted the Cherokee Nation and asked for permission to walk this sacred journey. During those early exchanges, I had also asked if we could finish the journey by honouring the people the best way we knew how – by finishing it with them.

A little while later, John Ross arrived in a red truck from the Cherokee Heritage Centre. John is a Cherokee elder who specialises in the preservation of language. That day, he wore a brown shirt with 'Cherokee Nation' on it. An elderly man with a proud bearing, he shook my hand firmly. We left the folded carts and remaining kit in the red support truck that would slowly follow behind. The five of us took a small back road behind the highway toward a wide green valley. On a distant hill, the neon lights of Tahlequah city began to illuminate. Restaurants, pharmacies, and grocery store signs flashed and blinked against the darkening sky. We had thought about this moment for a long time. We'd travelled 2,082km over three months to get here and now we were on the brink. There would be no fanfare or celebration, which was how we wanted it. Anything else would seem out of place. This final section was about connecting to the past, with John Ross, and to the future with Parker and Wrighter. Nothing more.

We walked and talked – about the history of the language, about efforts made in Cherokee schools to empower the youth, and about what is being done today to sustain Cherokee culture. John spoke with proud reverence about immersion schools paid for by the Nation to encourage children to learn Cherokee culture and about how he personally translates books and government documents into Cherokee. I felt honoured to be with him and I didn't want him to go, but the humid weather, approaching thunderstorms, and blooming hills asked too much of him. We shook hands and I hoped to see him again one day. I found out later that his family were linked directly to the Trail of Tears.

The road became dirt track after a while. The skies took on the familiar texture of charcoal that presaged violence. As the winds picked up, I heard the first drops of rain in the upper reaches of surrounding trees. Until then, Jamie and I had managed to dodge the worst of this region's volatile southern weather, but now the four of us would be stuck inside it with no exit strategy. But with so little distance to cover, it didn't matter. What mattered was our conversation with Parker and Wrighter. From the outset, we'd agreed we could ask questions freely and without fear. This was for them too and we would also be open to any question they might ask. As the rain fell, we discussed how Cherokee youth view the modern culture and what it's like growing up native in the US. The inevitable question of why we were doing this eventually came. For Jamie and me, the 'why' of it was what drove the expedition. Before we started, we had felt this was a period in history that had to be remembered, shared, and learned from. We also felt a sense of great injustice that the Cherokee were moved from their ancestral home to somewhere foreign and new, against their will. Under the storm, in

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Photos: Ian Finch

those final moments, nothing had changed; our 'why' still remained strong. If anything we felt even more passionate about sharing the story of the removals after everything we had personally been through. We could only try to understand and empathise with the gravity and emotional implications, personally and collectively, of what had been visited on an entire nation of people. And we found that, even today, the injustice of the removals still burns deeply within the Cherokee psyche and the best way for us to learn about its place in their culture was just to listen.

For three months, the intricate weather systems had been pivotal to our moods and progress, but now they were as nothing. Rain fell, but I barely noticed it. Wrighter spoke powerfully about his efforts to encourage and inspire Cherokee youth and to perpetuate Cherokee traditions. He and his brother cycled 1,500km of a northern route from the Trail to honour their ancestors. He later spent months cultivating a vegetable garden growing traditional Cherokee foods, intended to sustain the traditional Cherokee diet. His passion was inspiring. Our journey ended on the doorstep of the Cherokee Heritage Centre in Tahlequah. We greeted staff, drank coffee, and ate watermelon from a silver cooking pot on the floor. I shivered as the rain thundered on the roof of the building. Jamie and I hugged in celebration, in that awkward way men do. In the physical sense our journey was over. But we were about to begin another: we had a week to listen and learn from the people we had come so far to meet, before our flights took us back to our own interpretation of normality.

Outside, the rain formed puddles on the cobbled ground. Jamie and I had done something no-one else had done before in modern times. As everyone talked and laughed, I felt a slight emptiness – that tomorrow I wouldn't walk, or have a distance goal to meet, or new friends to make. What brought me back round, and what mattered most, was that over the last three months we had sought to honour and remember a great people whilst illuminating a very human story of injustice, resilience, resistance, and survival. The Cherokee are a people forced from their ancestral home, relocating to a foreign place, in winter and by foot, with only the belongings they could carry. Imagine that. That journey, and its cause, is a desperately important moment in history that needs to be heard, remembered, shared, and constantly retold. The fact that the Cherokee are one of the most successful tribal Nations in the US is testament to their strength and tenacity, and their commitment to preserve their culture as custodians for the future.

For them, I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat.

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Photo: Ian Finch