Black Hawk: Illinois and the Trail of Tears

By the third decade of the 19th century the future of those Native Americans tribes still residing east of the Mississippi was set. Though the U. S. Supreme Court had recognized in *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) that one such nation—the Cherokee—enjoyed limited sovereignty the aggressive demands of the cotton culture insured that these people would soon have little choice but to abandon their ancestral lands. In 1838, the U.S. Army, under orders from President Van Buren, first rounded up the Cherokee from their homes in Georgia and the Carolinas and then placed them in camps in Tennessee. The army then forced these men, women, and children to march some 800 miles during the harsh winter months to the Indian Territory, in what would one day become Oklahoma. Over three thousand individuals—representing about a quarter of the nation—were buried along what had become known at the Trail of Tears.

The Trail of Tears has long been associated with the Cherokee but that connection has concealed an even harsher history, as there were, sad to say, more than one trail and more than one people who struggled along its path. The term was, in fact, first introduced with the removal of the Choctaws from their Mississippi lands in 1831 and it was used again a few years later with the removal of the Creek and the Chickasaw from their villages that were spread across the states of Alabama, Georgia, Florida and South Carolina. As was to happen with the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Creek and the Chickasaw had also witnessed the death of a tragic number of their people.

The Trail of Tears has in the years since come to symbolize the brutality of the American people or at least its government towards the indigenous nations. Just as meaningfully, the Trail of Tears could also serve as the benchmark for the final defeat of the tribes east of the Mississippi, who after nearly two centuries of struggle lost their hold on their land. Many of these people had fought, as one would expect, hard to retain their lands. Even before the English colonies had declared their independence and for decades after, the Narragansett, Delaware, the Powhatan, the Shawnee and the Iroquois and other nations had fought desperately and often successfully in skirmishes and battles against settlers who encroached upon their lands. In time, however, technology and the sheer numbers of soldiers and settlers overcame the tribes.

The Creeks, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Cherokee had—for the most part—chosen another strategy. Members of what is known even today as the Five Civilized Tribes (with the Seminole being the fifth), had, to varying degrees, adapted their culture to that of the advancing American nation, with the various tribes adopting their own constitutions, law codes and judicial systems. The Cherokee were perhaps the most ambitious, opening schools, adopting an alphabet and even publishing their own newspaper. It was all to no avail, however, as the American desire for land was simply insatiable. The tribe's strategy of accommodation failed. Forced to leave their homes over a several year period, each of these nations followed a different path along what we know as the Trail of Tears to the newly designated Indian Territory in Oklahoma. The Cherokee passed through southern Illinois.

Even those nations who had hoped to reach an accommodation with the Americans could not always avoid war. The Cherokees, the Choctaw, and Chickasaw had intermittently clashed with the Americans and the Creeks had battled against Andrew Jackson during the War of 1812 and then Winfield Scott in 1836 and 1837. To the north, across the Ohio River Valley, the fighting was, if anything, more severe and in Illinois it was perhaps even more tragic.

By the mid-1600s, the loosely confederated tribes of the Illiniwek welcomed the French when they entered into what became known as Illinois. The French had come for the great wealth that fur offered and offered the Illiniwek—which the French pronounced as *Illinois*—European goods for the fur that they trapped. The relationship was mutually beneficial and the French posed no threat to the Illiniwek and other tribes since they sought fur, not land. Unfortunately for the Illiniwek, the immensely profitable trade also brought disease, which decimated the confederation's numbers, and invited raiding parties from the Iroquois confederation. From their homeland in central New York, the Iroquois tribes sought to control the fur trade and they had already subjugated or destroyed their neighboring tribes. Beginning in the early 1700s and continuing for the next fifty years, the Illiniwek fought the Iroquois, often successfully, but slowly their power decline.

Then, as fighting broke out between the British and the colonies, Scots-Irish and other American settlers flooded through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. The Illiniwek—not trusting the British who had occupied the Northwest following the French and Indian War—sided with the Americans but suffered attacks from their kindred Algonquin tribes who had long opposed the advance of American settlement. The once powerful Illiniwek were soon reduced to a few villages, but the Miami, Kickapoo, Sac, and Fox, who had entered what had been Illiniwek territory as that confederation had weakened over the years, fought the Americans for the next twenty years. Under the leadership of the Shawnee, these tribes won several battles they eventually suffered a critical defeat at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. Seemingly, the Americans had conquered the Northwest.

The tribes in Illinois and across what was now known as the Northwest Territory were far from conquered, however. Though the way had been cleared for settlement across Ohio, Indiana and into Illinois, the tribes continued to farm and hunt in those regions beyond the frontier. In Illinois, the Kickapoo were the first to face the advancing American settlers. Kin to the Illiniwek, the Kickapoo had settled along the Sangamon River in west central Illinois in the mid-1700s. During the 1820s, they skirmished with the American settlers who were advancing north and west into Illinois from the Kentucky settlements. The Kickapoo, like so many tribes before them, were soon overwhelmed by the sheer number of settlers, leaving them little choice but to abandon their homeland. They left Illinois but this tribe—unlike so many others—was to its traditional identity. Determined to retain their identity as a people, many of the Kickapoo migrated to northern Mexico where they remain to this day.

Less fortunate, if indeed the Kickapoo can be seen as having been fortunate, were the Sauk. The Saux, who originally had gathered as a people along the Saginaw River in east central Michigan, retreated to the region west of Lake Michigan due to the onslaught of the Iroquois, eventually settling in the mid-1700s with their close allies, the Fox, in the lower Rock and Wisconsin Valleys. With settlers moving north toward the Sauk lands, the federal government forced a treaty upon the Sauk and Fox in 1831, just as the Choctaw far to the south were abandoning their ancestral lands. Complying with the terms of the treaty, the Sauk and Fox moved across the Mississippi into Iowa and suffered through a harsh winter with little food. Though hunters, the Sauk and Fox also relied heavily upon agriculture, as did many of the tribes east of the Mississippi. The loss of their homeland had also meant the loss of the fields that the Sauk had been productively using for decades. Though facing the prospect of famine, most of the Sauk accepted, if with regret, their forced dislocation, but one of the Sauk's war leaders, Black Hawk, decided to fight. He led a minority of the tribe back to their lands the next spring in the hope of establishing a new village and reclaiming their fields. He instead provoked a war.

When Black Hawk crossed the Mississippi the Illinois governor—in near panic—sent hastily assembled and essentially untrained militia north, including the young captain, Abraham Lincoln, to confront the Sauk. Though Lincoln himself missed combat, others did not. When other tribes failed to join his own warriors, Black Hawk attempted to avoid a fight, but the militia attacked a Sauk emissary. Some four hundred militia advanced, but when confronted with perhaps seventy warriors, the militia bolted in what soon became known as Skillman's Run. The fleeing militia did not stop running until they reached the safety of the settlements west of Chicago, some seventy miles away. Panic swept across the entire Illinois frontier, though Black Hawk had too few warriors to pose any threat to the settlements. Encumbered by their families, Black Hawk and his few warriors never stood a real chance. Within a few weeks, U. S. regular troops that had disembarked in Chicago marched north and west, chasing Black Hawk and his band into Wisconsin. Trapped against the Bad Axe River, Black Hawk attempted to surrender only to see American troopers massacre most of his people as they attempted to flee across the river, some 150 warriors, women and children being butchered. Black Hawk himself escaped with a few of his warriors and families but eventually was captured. He spent the following year imprisoned but rejoined the remnants of the Sauk on a newly established reservation in Iowa. Eventually, they lost that land as well and were forcibly moved to the Indian Territory, where they joined the survivors of the Trail of Tears.

Today, the Black Hawk War is likely to be remembered, when it is remembered at all, as an adventure in Lincoln's youth, but the war can also be viewed as representing the last significant effort of the eastern tribes to retain their ancestral homelands. The Sauk and other tribes in Illinois had decades earlier joined the Shawnee and Miami to fight the onslaught of American settlers when the Americans first flooded through the Cumberland Gap and they had over the next several decades fought against both militia and regulars. Though the tribes had often defeated their enemies in battle they invariably lost the wars, as they had neither the fire power nor the numbers to stem the tide of settlement. The war that Black Hawk provoked by returning to Illinois, however justified his action may have

been, was little more than a forlorn attempt to retain a way of life that had already been lost. While he could not succeed, efforts by others within his own tribe and within the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek and Chickasaw to reach an accommodation with the American nation and people by adopting white ways had also failed. Perhaps no strategy could protect these nations against the advance of the American people.

Chjones: Revised May 30, 2007