



The Potawatomi Trail of Death

Directions: After reading the selection, complete the Trail of Death column on the worksheet. On the back of the worksheet, explain one new idea/fact you learned from the reading.

Chief Menominee
- powerful
Potawatomi chief
who refused to
succumb to the US
Government

In early August 1838, Chief Menominee protested the removal of his tribe as authorized by the Indian Removal Act of 1830. He refused to sign any of the treaties and refused to leave Indiana.

"The President does not know the truth. He, like me, has been imposed upon. He does not know that you made my young chiefs drunk and got their consent and pretended to get mine. He would not drive me from my home and the graves of my tribe, and my children, who have gone to the Great Spirit, nor allow you to tell me that your braves will take me, tied like a dog. The President is just, but he listens to the words of his young chiefs who have lied; and when he knows the truth, he will leave me to my own. I have not sold my lands. I will not sell them. I have not signed any treaty, and will not sign any. I am not going to leave my lands."

Later that month, white squatters (a person who settles on land under government regulation, in order to acquire the title) tried to seize Potawatomi reservation land. The Potawatomi retaliated by burning an American's hut. The Americans then responded by burning a dozen Indian cabins.

As a result, Indiana Governor David Wallace ordered General John Tipton to forcibly remove the Potawatomi. On August 29, 1838 Tipton and his men seized Menominee and surrounded his village at Twin Lakes along with rounding up other Potawatomi from the surrounding area. Menominee and the other chiefs were put into a caged wagon to ensure that there would be no uprising. After their departure, Menominee's village was burned. 150 other Potawatomi remained behind living on land they owned privately.

The group set out on September 4, 1838. 859 Potawatomi departed on what they would call the "Trail of Death." The following is a description from George Winter's diary:

"The morning following this eventful and impressive day, the emigrating column was formed, headed by the Captive Chiefs who were conveyed in wagons, guarded by the strictest surveillance. Soon the whole nation were seen moving down the hill sides, along the banks of the Eel river, on the way to their westward home. ...

Ah! Well do I remember that scene, as the Indians left a beautiful grove of oaks where they had encamped a few days previous to their emigration, and descended a gentle declivity, the summit of which commanded an extensive view of a rich and wide spreading fertile land - and upon which with many others I stood to view with effect the little band as they passed by us. ...

... they formed with their heavily packed ponies a picturesque scene, which a painter could but have deemed lovely as they followed the serpentine windings of a trail on the lower wild lands. ... I gazed with many others whom curiosity had brought to the spot, at the little emigrating band until they faded before us in the western horizon. The Indian's is a mournful memory!"

Also accompanying the Potawatomi was their advocate and friend, Father Benjamin Petit. Father Petit was the priest at the Chapel of Twin Lakes. Father Petit offered legal advice to the Indians and lobbied federal officials. He was determined to accompany his 'children' should they be forced to relocate. They were and he did. It was Father Petit who wanted to ask (although he never did) General Tipton, "how such events may take place in this country of liberty?"

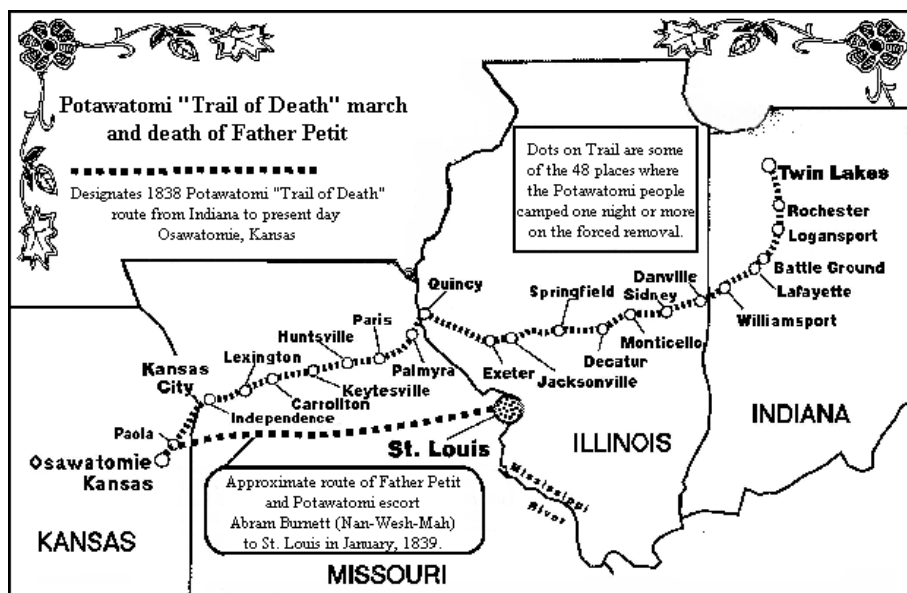
The second day out, the first child died, and 51 Potawatomi became too sick to continue. By the time they reached Logansport, four more children were dead. The 300 who were sick required a halt so a hospital could be erected. The march continued across northern Illinois until it reached the ferry crossing the Mississippi at Quincy, Illinois. The Potawatomi camped outside the town for a few days while the ferry carried their baggage across. When Sunday came, more than 300 of these "wild Indians" attended mass at the local Catholic Church.

43 Potawatomi died on the march. Many walked the 660 mile distance, which took two months. The US Government had hired shady businessmen to provide the food, shelter, and water for this trip, and this decision caused a disaster. With rotten food, poor shelter, and a lack of water, many Potawatomi soon began to become ill and die. Only 816 arrived at Osawatomie, Kansas on November 4, 1838. Half of the graves marking their route were filled with their children. Among the casualties was Father Petit who had volunteered to accompany his congregation on their journey to Kansas, but he became ill when they reached the Illinois River and died at St. Louis in February, 1839.

Nevertheless, the journey did not destroy the spirit of the Indians. Children were also born on the journey and the Potawatomi men collaborated to hunt and bring in additional food along the trail. They also insisted that Father Petit be allowed to say mass during the trip. Even at the end, one chief is quoted as saying,

“that they had now arrived at their journey’s end – that the government must now be satisfied. They had been taken from homes affording them plenty and brought to a desert – a wilderness – and were now to be scattered and left as the husbandman scatters his seed.”

According to Andrew Cayton in his book, *Frontier Indiana*, “The history of frontier Indiana is more than a story of one group of human beings gaining the power to remake the world and call it progress while demonizing and destroying the worlds of others. It is a tale of how the striving of flawed human beings to survive and comprehend life so often led them to misperceive, misunderstand, and mistrust each other, and ultimately to behave in unforgivably brutal ways.” Cayton goes on to say, “In the end, it is the great value of history to offer not answers to the kind of question he (Petit) asked, but simply to perpetuate his question, to keep asking “Why?”



Cayton, Andrew R.L. *Frontier Indiana*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Print.
Madison, James H. *The Indiana Way*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. Print.
"The Potawatomi Trail of Death." *The Potawatomi Trail of Death*. Web.
<http://www.usd116.org/mfoley/trail/trail.html>