

## Trail of Tears.

In the 1830's many of the Native American Tribes on the East Coast were relocated by the US Government into what we now know as Oklahoma. This event was not a shining hour in US history, but it is a saga that reflects a similar journey experienced by those who grieve the loss of a loved one. The irony of the story is that the new "Promised Land" for the Tribes contained a huge basin of crude oil. This oil has generated monetary benefits for the generations that have followed those who traveled the Trail of Tears.

The Native Americans were forced out of their homes in the East, some times by fire or at gun point – but always under pressure to leave the safe, familiar homeland that represented lifetimes of emotional investments and connections. In their hasty departure, they were able to bring only a few of their possessions. They were initially held in Forts, but ultimately they were forced to walk to a land that they had never seen. A new homeland that they did not desire to occupy. Each day held physical and emotional suffering of unspeakable hardship. By the time one of the Tribes reached the territory of Oklahoma, approximately one third of the original group had perished.

The tradition at the death of a loved one in the original Native American homeland was to build a raised platform which would allow the body to be protected from wild animals as it slowly slipped away. The body would remain on the platform for several months. The family members would go daily to the 4 posts of the platform to grieve. After a time, a member of the tribe would gather the remains, the bones, and wrap them into a bundle and give them to the family. It was considered a family obligation to safeguard the bones of the beloved. The family tradition of honoring the loved one was significant enough to cause many of the families to carry in their arms the bundled bones of their loved ones when they were forced out of their homes.

As they walked along the route to Oklahoma, carrying their burdens of family bones they encountered flat plains, deeply wooded areas, steep cliffs and rivers to cross. The added responsibility of caring for small children and the elderly made the bones an overwhelming burden for the bearer. Ultimately many of the bundles of bones were left in burial mounds, but some were lost in the waters of the Tennessee and Mississippi rivers. A few of the bundle carriers perished themselves because they held on to the bones while attempting to carry them through the waters.

The journey of the Native Americans on the Trail of Tears reflects in many ways the journey of the griever. Forced from the comfort of the "Homeland of our beloved's presence in our life," the griever is pressed into a journey that is fraught with flat dry plains of shock, confusing forests of decision to be made, with high cliffs of emotions, and deep rivers of sadness. God understands the need to honor, grieve and remember our loved one. But the caution for the griever is to not carry the bones of our loved one clutched in our arms. We can take a page from the Trail of Tears to see that when we lay down those heavy burdens of loss and trust God to walk the journey with us. We can then open our arms to the adventure of our next chapter, our Promise Land, our Oklahoma. We can trust that our Oklahoma has a yet to be discovered gusher of blessings waiting for us. It is our decision to shift our focus from the "bones" of our loved one to God's promise. The promise that He loves us and has a "Homeland of Peace" already prepared for us.