

Kennedy Cooper's Roots Paper

My family roots are connected with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) based in Western North Carolina, and while it is not a typical immigration story of travel from crossing oceans, it is a story of movement, displacement, resilience, and integration. This story shows an exchange with different themes of migration, both internal and forced, while also showcasing land dispossession and the navigation of identity in an evolving United States.

During the mid 19th century the Cherokee of the United States faced federal policy of Indian Removal, resulting in the Trail of Tears in 1838-1839. Many of the Cherokee nation were forcefully removed and relocated to modern day Oklahoma, except those who stayed behind in their ancestral homeland in the mountains. In the case of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians story we see a glimpse of resistance in the decision to stay in their homeland was influenced by resistance.

While many Cherokee migrated west, those who stayed behind faced a different kind of migration. They stayed but adapted, resisting forceful movement, or moved internally from mountains to new lands. My family's ancestors belonged to that group of people who remained in place and rebuilt a community. According to the Native American archives, "Some tribes moved west peacefully, though with heavy hearts, and others resisted, eventually being forced west in the terrible march known as the "Trail of Tears."¹

The push factors here are forceful removal, loss of ancestral land, federal treaty violations. The pull factors for staying consisted of ancestral ties to land, cultural preservation, and the possibility for land purchase. For my ancestors, staying meant maintaining farming, gathering materials for survival, contributing to the local economy, rather than migrating far away.

¹ Fold3, Native American, "Native American Archives", 1

After removal of a majority of the Cherokee in the East, the remaining communities had to adapt to the U.S. Indian policy.

Because my ancestors stayed in their homelands, there was less of the stereotypical chain migration of European immigration where commonly families or community follow early migrants, there was more so an internal migration in the sense of moving from traditional village to reservation boundary lands, adjusting to displacement, or moving to nearby towns for work and then returning back.

Once the Cherokee remained in place, their experience in America wasn't always fully respectful. They were eventually legally recognized as the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, but their recognition and land base were not always well maintained.

They managed to purchase the Qualla Boundary but the process was not an easy path, The EBCI still retains a strong cultural identity. Since the start of the modern tourist industry beginning in the 1930s, the tribe has continued to maintain distinct cultural and authentic identity through conservation of the Cherokee language and traditional life.

For my family, that has meant community ties through clan and tribal membership, upkeep of Cherokee language and traditional stories. As many minorities in the U.S. often faced, there were times of discrimination, land loss, poverty, and assimilation pressures, being forced to send children to boarding schools, and being excluded from economic opportunities. From American Indian Correspondence, "We must teach them to think, feel, act, and work. We must form their whole character—all their religious, moral, intellectual, social and industrial habits. This is the work to be done."² My family was directly impacted by the forceful placement of boarding schools. My mother's great uncle, Fedrick Warner Cooper, son of Harvey and Stacy Cooper, died

² American Indian Correspondence, 1

from a knife wound from a fight with an older student. He was attending the Cherokee Indian Boarding School at that time and is now buried at the Drama Cemetery in Cherokee, North Carolina. He was 13 when he was killed.

While discrimination against Indigenous people was not the same as immigration nativism experienced by European immigrants. During this time, they engaged with the broader American economy, some moved to urban settings for work, or migrated temporarily for jobs and then returned to their mountain homeland.

Their experience is similar and different from other immigrant stories in many ways. When compared to the other immigrant stories we have studied in class, for example, European immigrants from Italy or Asian immigrants, several similarities and differences appear.

Push and pull factors are shown as migrants leave or relocate because of economic hardship, land loss, political pressure, or search for better opportunities. My ancestors experienced push factors of forced removal, loss of traditional land, and federal policy, and pull factors of remaining on homeland, maintaining cultural identities, and land purchase.

Many immigrant stories are inherently voluntary (or semi- voluntary) migrations seeking a better life for their families. My ancestors' story is made up of forced removal, dispossession, and survival rather than free migration.

This migration story is internal within the U.S. , and staying in the homelands. This “immigrant” label is a bit different, as tribal members are Indigenous to this land, so their movement and displacement has a different context than many immigrant groups.

Other immigrant groups typically migrated from oceans away, forceful movement in use of slavery, or in hopes of finding work to provide for their families who stay in their homeland.

My ancestors' people were in the process of having their land rights, tribal status, and sovereignty recognized by the U.S. government. Their story connects with dispossession of Native land, treaties, U.S. Indian policy became less targeted to many central immigration groups.

While many immigrant groups retain languages and cultural traditions, Indigenous peoples experienced legal pressures such as the boarding schools, forced assimilation, and language bans to abandon their culture. The Cherokee language, crafts, and culture were attempted to be suppressed. While language within the EBCI is used and taught to our youth, there is generational trauma that my family has been affected by. My grandparents are active in our community and practice traditional crafts, my granny struggles to speak our language due to the backlash her grandparents faced during their time in the boarding schools. This has caused my mother to have not grown up with the language herself. She will briefly speak to our family in this language but will very rarely speak it herself out of habit from not being allowed to growing up.

While my family's experience connects to broad themes of migration and settlement, it also connects to the Indigenous displacement, survival of tribal identity, and complex navigation of sovereignty and assimilation.

In my own life, knowing that my ancestors are part of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians gives me a sense of comfort. It anchors me within a history of resilience and community. I am fortunate enough to have grown up on the Qualla boundary surrounded by such a loving community of people. My present day family has made me so proud to be who I am culturally. My grandpa is my biggest inspiration. He gave so much to his community and has taught my

family to do the same. His example inspired my family to be engaged with those around us. My sister lives out our traditions daily and is a perfect example of a strong Indigenous woman.

Because my ancestors remained in place rather than moving far away, my sense of home is tied to the mountains, the rivers and where I grew up on the reservation. It shapes my identity not just as someone of Cherokee descent, but as someone connected to a thriving tribal community.

The experience of my ancestors in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is part of migration, part settlement, and survival. Their story is connected to larger economic, political, and cultural histories of immigration and displacement, push and pull factors, internal migration, and land recognition contributed to identity recognition. They differ from most immigrant stories in their identity of Indigenous people. Belonging is not just being native born to some place, but staying rooted and rebuilding community. For me, that connection is a source of strength and a reminder that I am a part of a living community with deep ties to culture and self determination.