



Kay Smith's Painting of Black Hawk, Sauk Leader.

He is dressed in a ceremonial robe wearing a heavy bear claw necklace. He appears regal and confident with his powerful rifle but the path before him is rocky. We see his white horse, a sign that he and his people came in peace but the sky is filled with denial. It is turning blood red and vultures of death are circling ever closer.

Prairie State Bicentennial with Kay Smith

To continue my series of conversations celebrating our state's bicentennial I have chosen my painting of Black Hawk. Black Hawk was a Sauk, living in the Illinois Territory. He became an enemy of the United States by fighting for the British in the War of 1812. At that time our capital was in Kaskaskia on the Mississippi River but by 1818, when Illinois became the 21st state of the union, the general assembly wanted to move the capital to a more central location. They chose Vandalia.

During that time, Black Hawk had been forced onto a reservation in Iowa. The Sauk Chief Keokuk sold their lands east of the Mississippi to the U. S. government. Black Hawk never recognized the treaty since he nor many of the other tribes did not have a voice in the decision.

In 1832, Black Hawk, 67 years old, led a band of 500 Sauk warriors, with their families back across the Mississippi River from Iowa to reclaim the land of his people near Rock Island, Illinois. Fear spread through the region among the white settlers.

Abraham Lincoln was 23 years old, living in New Salem, Illinois and unemployed. He and many young men of the area enlisted in the Illinois Militia to pursue and fight against Black Hawk. Lincoln was chosen captain of his company. Later in his life he said that vote of confidence gave him more satisfaction than any of his political successes.

Lincoln never made contact with Black Hawk although there was bitter fighting across upper Illinois and into Wisconsin. Black Hawk and his men were eventually defeated. Jefferson Davis, future president of the Confederacy, escorted the surrendered Black Hawk, and others to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri in September 1832.

Black Hawk later was released and became a celebrity traveling around the country giving interviews at George Catlin's Indian Gallery Exhibitions. The Black Hawk War was the last American Indian uprising east of the Mississippi River.

Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830. That enforcement not only effected Black Hawk and his people but laid waste to the Cherokee Nation. Unfortunately for the Cherokee gold found on their land was coveted by Andrew Jackson.

The U.S. military would march, 8000 people a thousand miles to what is now Oklahoma wearing little clothing and most without shoes or moccasins. During the bitter winter of 1838/39, they crossed Tennessee and Kentucky arriving at Golconda . a small town on the Ohio River from there the suffering Cherokees walked, limped, cried and crawled their Trail of Tears west to Jonesboro near the Mississippi River wailing their death songs and dying. 4000 perished along the way, left in unmarked graves.

The Cherokee did not go passively. They had a written language and published the Cherokee Phoenix newspaper protesting the Removal Act. They lobbied Congress with a petition of 15,000 signatures. Their case was heard by the Supreme Court which ruled that the Cherokee was a sovereign nation. However, President Andrew Jackson ignored the ruling and enforced the Removal Act, effectively ending the presence of Native American Indians in the Midwest states

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