An Innocent Voyage West and the Trail of Tears

Once upon a time, his name was a household word, so great was his fame. He gave us a headless horseman and bearded old man with a rusty shotgun who appeared in town after an absence of umpteen years—tales like “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

The name is Washington Irving, considered America’s first short story writer. Washington Irving, named after the President, was a yankee long before there were any. He was 56 years old when baseball was invented in Cooperstown, in 1839. He spent many years in Europe, being an aristocrat, and trying to make a living as a writer, which he did. A whole bevy of European writers admired him, as did American novelists and essayists like Hawthorne and Melville, even Edgar Allen Poe.

All these years later, Washington Irving would be a confidante of the Kardashians, a People magazine cover boy—and hunted by paparazzi. He was a star.

In 1832, just a few months after seventeen years in Europe, he headed west to the frontier—for adventure, and a maybe a book as long as he was there. He took several little notebooks—2 ½ by 4 inches, string-bound—and metallic pencils (quills and ink were a bother in the wilderness), then started on what he called “Notes Concerning the Far West,” which wasn’t really the “far west,” but the Great Plains.

And everything went swimmingly. He suffered with occasionally troublesome bowels, but little more. Ate well and was blessed with great weather (it was, as we say, “Indian summer”). Along with a hearty band of others, a great time was had by all. And, Irving got his book, A Tour on the Prairies.
He stayed about a month, October 10 to November 9, then hustled back east and bundled the manuscript off to his publisher. Their meeting with the Osage people was a joy. He found them gracious and fascinating.

The landscape—its hills and valleys and woodlands—he found gorgeous:

We were overshadowed by lofty trees, with straight smooth trunks, like stately columns; and as the glancing rays of the sun shone through the transparent leaves . . . I was reminded of the effect of sunshine among the stained windows and clustering columns of a Gothic cathedral . . . there is a grandeur and solemnity in our spacious forests of the West, that awaken in me the same feeling I have experienced in those vast and venerable piles, and the sound of the wind sweeping through them, supplies occasionally the deep breathings of the organ.

He's talking about east-central Oklahoma, and they means Irving wasn't alone. He was accompanied by three frontiersmen and an architect who had a significant hand in designing the U. S. Capitol, but whose major task was to reign in the impulses of his relative, a Swiss count, a kid who fell in love with every Native girl he saw.

The month in the wilderness was idyllic, and Irving's book was a psalm of praise to the plains.

I forgot to mention Mr. Henry Leavitt Ellsworth, the only member of the tour who really had a job. Mr. Ellsworth was to look over the area they visited, to observe its topography and assess its possibilities, because soon enough the government of President Andrew Jackson would be sending tens of thousands of Native people to the far west, in a move congressionally-approved to put all of America's indigenous out of the way of an American nation whose Manifest Destiny was to fill the continent with fine, white Christian men and women.
Mr. Ellsworth approved—how could he not? it was Indian summer. “It looks good,” he must have told whatever superiors were interested. “It looks great.”

And so began an 800-mile trek of horror we call “The Trail of Tears,” the forced relocation of Indian tribes from their ancestral homelands out east, many bound to the same tight circle of land Washington Irving traveled in 1832.

You can read *A Tour on the Prairies*. You should be able to get it from your local library. Better yet, look on line. You can read it free. There’s not a word about “the Trail of Tears.” Irving chose not to bring the subject up, I guess. They were having too good a time.