

## *Off Alabama's Beaten Path, Tribute to a Native American's Journey Home*

By Jennifer Crossley Howard

July 22, 2014

FLORENCE, Ala. — Tom Hendrix spent a quarter-century stacking eight million pounds of sandstone and limestone to honor a woman he never knew.

In the autumn of his life, Mr. Hendrix now sees his Wichahpi Commemorative Stone Wall, a few steps from the Natchez Trace Parkway in northern Alabama, beckoning wanderers, spiritual leaders and artists.

Dedicated to his Native American great-great grandmother, Te-lah-nay, the wall, recorded in the Library of Congress, ranges in height from four feet to almost six feet in some spots and is the largest unmortared wall in the United States. It commemorates Te-lah-nay's five-year walk home from Oklahoma to Florence after she was displaced during the Trail of Tears, the forced relocation of Native Americans from the Southeast following the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

The wall also exemplifies an eccentric American tradition of individuals who devote their lives to highly personal monuments. In nearby Cullman, Ala., for example, a Benedictine monk carved the Ave Maria Grotto, a miniature collection of buildings from Europe and Jerusalem.

During much of his own project, Mr. Hendrix labored in relative obscurity. "I love it when the master stonemasons come and ask me how many helpers I had," he told a group of visitors recently. "I wore out three trucks, 22 wheelbarrows, 3,700 pairs of gloves, three dogs and one old man."

The wall is still not an official stop along the 444-mile Natchez Trace Parkway, the historic path running roughly from Natchez, Miss., to Nashville that was first created by Native Americans. But Mr. Hendrix's inclusion in "Muscle Shoals," the 2013 documentary on the Alabama city famous for its music, added an international dimension to the word-of-mouth attention he had picked up over the years.

To Mr. Hendrix, the wall is a mile-long holy place that winds through his property under a thick canopy of oak and beech trees. It attracts tourists from places as varied as France, Montana and the local Methodist church.

Mr. Hendrix, a youthful 80-year-old retiree with a full head of white hair, engages visitors with solemn wit.

"I'm a firm believer that you cannot see America from I-65," Mr. Hendrix said. "You've got to get off the beaten path to see what crazy people like me are doing."

People have been visiting the wall consistently for about 10 years, said Alison Stanfield, assistant director of the Florence/Lauderdale Tourism board. Since the documentary was released, 50 to 250 people have come each weekend. Ms. Stanfield's office receives about 1,200 inquiries a month. Mr. Hendrix does little to publicize his monument.

"Tom has said that if people find it on their own, they were meant to come," Ms. Stanfield said. "He's never been one to ask for brochures or help getting the word out. It's one of those truly 'if you build it, they will come' attractions."



After being displaced during the Trail of Tears, Te-lah-nay walked for five years from Oklahoma to her home in Florence.  
Robert Rausch for The New York Times

Mr. Hendrix retired from the Ford Motor Company's aluminum plant in Sheffield, Ala., when it closed in 1983, but he still works eight- to nine-hour days. He greets visitors from his lawn chair, often speaking to them in proverbs.

Mr. Hendrix grew up hearing stories about Te-lah-nay, a member of the Yuchi tribe, from his grandmother. A chance meeting with a Yuchi woman 30 years ago inspired the wall, he said.

"We shall all pass through this earth," he said to visitors in June. "Only stones remain. We honor our ancestors with stone."

Trace Hendrix, the second of Mr. Hendrix's five children, spends weekends helping his father clear branches and sell rock carvings of crosses, letters and frogs. He listens closely. One day he will inherit the wall and its stories.

"He's taught me patience and to look at life with your third eye, your heart," Trace Hendrix said.

Tom Hendrix's wife supported his project from the beginning. "She said, 'Are you kidding me?'" he said, smiling proudly. "'You're going to do this the rest of your life? Go get it, big boy.'"

He does not tire of his newfound attention, he said, because it widens Te-lah-nay's audience.

According to family lore, soon after Te-lah-nay was born, her grandmother placed her umbilical cord in the Tennessee River, making the river her sister. That connection, along with her dreams, Mr. Hendrix said, lured her home.

Musicians recording in nearby Muscle Shoals have long proclaimed mystical inspiration from the Tennessee River, a notion that originated with the Yuchi. The tribe called the river "nunuhsae," meaning the singing river, because they believed a woman resided in its waters, guiding them with her melodies.



Mr. Hendrix's wall is the largest unmortared one in the country.  
Robert Rausch for The New York Times

Te-lah-nay found no such woman in Oklahoma's rivers and began walking east.

Greg Camalier, the director of "Muscle Shoals," persuaded a skeptical Mr. Hendrix to appear in his film, which chronicled the music industry that arose across the river in the 1960s.

"The Yuchi were the earliest people there, and they had a musical connection to the place," Mr. Camalier said. "That's an intriguing part of the story."

The people keep coming to the Wichahpi wall, and they bring their own rocks to show respect. A slick, polished crescent from Saudi Arabia lies beside a piece of raw jade from China. Maoris from New Zealand and Aborigines from Australia have visited, as well as Navajos and Sioux. A family from Finland stopped by in June.

Wesley and Shelaine Powell of Collinwood, Tenn., visited the wall recently with their two children, Cayden, 10, and Saydee Mae, 6.

"This is going to be here long after he's gone," Ms. Powell said. "It makes you want to do more and try harder, no matter what it may be."

Such responses reflect Mr. Hendrix's aspirations for his project.

"She made an incredible journey," he said of his ancestor, Te-lah-nay. "I wasn't going to build her an ordinary memorial."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 13 of the New York edition with the headline: Off Alabama's Beaten Path, Tribute to Native American's Journey Home