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Getaway: Laid together, stone by stone

Tom's Wall, a personal memorial to the Trail of Tears, is a reflection on patience and love

by Cheré Coen

Our tourism hosts wouldn't explain where we were going as we drove along the winding woods of northern Alabama as part of a recent press tour. "You just have to see it," our guides told us.

Fall was slipping into the area, with a few maples and other hardwoods showing their colors, and a crisp breeze urged us to pull our jackets a little tighter together. We stopped alongside a cotton field and a woman hailing from Seattle immediately headed for a boll, ready to pluck the soft interior out to bring home as a souvenir until she realized wet cotton felt like, well, wet cotton.

Tom Hendrix wandered out of his driveway across the street, curious as to why we were stalling.

"The Yankees have to take a photo of the cotton," our host yelled back.

Hendrix laughed, as did the Southern journalists among us, but he didn't appear surprised. After all, he gets hundreds of visitors a year to this remote location, from all corners of the globe.

They come to see his wall.

Hendrix's story begins in the 1930s, when his grandmother used to tell him stories about his family, particularly his great-great-grandmother, Mary Hipp, a Yuchi Indian. Hipp had lived along the banks of the Tennessee River in what is now Lauderdale County, believing as many of her people did that a woman within the river's water sang to the residents.

In the 1830s, Hipp and her teenage sister, like many Native Americans of that time, were deported from 9 miles south of Florence to Oklahoma on the infamous Trail of Tears. They were given silver tags with numbers on them; Hipp's was "59."

But the waters didn't sing in Oklahoma, and Hipp dreamed of her mother beckoning her home. Even though her sister adjusted to life in Oklahoma, Hipp insisted on returning to Alabama. She spent five years on the road, hiding to keep from getting caught. When she arrived back in the Florence area around 1845, she met a white farmer who married her.

Hendrix researched this amazing woman's story, having her "59" button as evidence of her remarkable return. He eventually traveled to Oklahoma to speak with members of the Yuchi tribe, who accepted him as one of their own. After much introspection, Hendrix decided to build a wall on his property, stones stretching to the right in honor of Hipp's journey to Oklahoma and one stretching to the left for her long walk home. A tribal elder advised him to lay one stone for every step she took.

The result is a massive stone wall on either side of his multi-acred property, complete with benches and places to rest and contemplate, plus a sacred prayer circle. The wall consists of 23 million pounds

of stones, created in 32 years by one man.

“For 32 years I’ve laid one stone at a time,” Hendrix told us.

“Tom’s Wall,” as the locals call it, is the largest un-mortared wall and the largest memorial to a Native American woman in the United States. On top of his handiwork are stones from more than 100 indigenous tribes throughout the world, a 1907 meteorite, shells from Acadiana, a leather pouch with tokens, beaded necklaces, crystals and other items brought to Hendrix from many continents, even Antarctica.

But more than the stones is the spiritual nature of the place. As visitors walk the length of the wall, on average about five feet high and spanning several football fields long, sunlight trickles down through the dense woods and birds are heard overhead. There’s a divine peacefulness here, born of love and devotion to an ancestor who would not give up.

After a tour of the grounds, the group headed back to the van, some still fascinated by that cotton field. I longed to stay within the loving arms of Tom’s Wall, gravitating to the prayer circle and thinking of my own grandmothers, the strongest women I’ve known. After offering them both a prayer and letting them know how much I missed them, I could almost feel their comforting hands on my shoulders.

Hendrix gave me a hug upon leaving, and quietly slipped a jasper arrowhead into my hand. I could have sworn he saw them, too.
