A story we need to tell

648 words

You might have missed a Mormon monument not all that far from here, just down the road from Niobrara, Nebraska. It’s easy to forget.

In the middle years of the 19th century, the Poncas were here, the Santees were here, even some Pawnees--and occasional Sioux bands never far away. That meant cavalry and agents and suppliers and draymen, not to mention swells of dreamers when anyone out west claimed there was gold in them thar’ hills. Simply said, there were more people coming and going.

The silence today wasn't here in the winter of 1846, when Mormons, on their way to the Salt Lake, stopped here to winter. They intended to be all the way to the Rockies, but once the cold set in, they found themselves shivering at the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri, and they weren't alone. Soon after arriving, eight Ponca chiefs rode up and graciously made an offer of shared comfort to get them through the winter. Angels really, saints all around.

The Mormons were totally unprepared when a grassfire Native people started roared through their makeshift of village of shacks and dugouts, not to mention dangerously ill-prepared for the brutality winter on the Plains stages for those who can live through it. But the Poncas helped them regroup with their own building materials and restock their makeshift cupboards when men from both tribes went out together to hunt buffalo.

But some church members died that winter--11 to be exactly. And today a great stone monument, off the beaten path, names some of those who did--Newel Knight, for one, the leader of the ward that wintered at the Ponca camp, dead here of pneumonia, dead of winter. It was set here already more than a century ago.

Mormons were pilgrim refugees, people of a selective faith that wasn't the approved
revelation of those in the majority. In hand-pulled carts, they left Illinois for the promised land of Utah. Mr. Knight’s pilgrimage ended here; just a few days after he fought that prairie fire, he died right here at the mouth of the Niobrara.

But the Mormons’ long winter of 46-47, right here, is not only a story of death and deprivation. It's also a story of a community, open doors and open hearts, because those Ponca who lived here shared their lives and meager fortunes with the odd, religious white men and women stuck in the snow.

In 2003, the LDS church and its people thanked the Ponca tribe richly for what they did for those of their own who wintered here, ancestors fearful and hungry and anxious that this huge westward movement might just be a pipe dream.

This story of community is worth telling again and again, maybe most crucially the morning after some angry men or women determine that the only way to make a name or support a cause is to kill innocent people in an act of terrorism, something that happens all too frequently.

At those moments especially, more of us should take a drive past the monument marking the thanksgiving of Mormon people for what the Ponca did for them so many years ago. It’s a blessing to remember that once upon a time. Mormon refugees by the thousands swarmed across the face of the largely uncharted Great Plains on their way to place I don't doubt most of them couldn't pronounce. Just so happens that along the way, they sought shelter at the confluence of two great rivers. There, those refugees were sustained--accepted and provided for--by a tribe of Native Americans themselves often besieged by aggressive neighbors all around.

Not all that far from here, once upon a time two beleaguered people in troubled families helped each other. It happened. Out here where few of us pass, it actually happened.

It's a story we need to hear--and tell.